INTRODUCTION

Vietnam was a war of choice. Understanding it requires a reckoning with this stubborn fact. The United States was not provoked into war, and none of the Cold War justifications of containment or the "domino theory" required the US military to intervene. If South Vietnam fell to a communist insurgency, the Chinese or the North Vietnamese were not going to "land on the beaches of Waikiki"—as Vice President Lyndon Johnson rather daringly warned in 1961. It was not a war fought in self-defense or for democratic ideals. What motivated the United States to go to war and stay there was a fear of appearing weak.

John F. Kennedy was the first president to fully appreciate the danger Vietnam posed, not to the United States but to himself. Just as Eisenhower had feared Senator Joe McCarthy's Red-baiters, Kennedy and Johnson feared being tarred as liberal doves by conservatives. Johnson scaled up the war effort out of the same fear, while Nixon dreaded becoming "the first president to lose a war."

It was a peculiar war from the start, inseparable from the government debates and political calculations that launched it. Kennedy set the tone when he tiptoed in, hoping to "hold the line" until he was safely reelected for a second term in 1964, at which point he planned to "explore all options," including getting out. His likely opponents in 1964 ridiculed his caution in the matter of Vietnam. After Kennedy's assassination in 1963, they were even harder on his successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson.[1]

Johnson took no comfort from the entirely American irony that he routed Barry Goldwater in the 1964 elections chiefly because the public feared that Goldwater would drag the country into the Vietnam War. And yet the moment LBJ was inaugurated, the braying for an escalation of

the war resumed from the right. Ronald Reagan demanded "full mobilization" and a blockade of Haiphong harbor: "I don't see how a nation our size, engaged with a nation that size, can talk about a ten- or twenty-year war. We ought to go in and get it over with." Richard Nixon warned that Vietnam would be *the* issue in 1968 if Johnson didn't "win the war, and end it." LBJ's waking nightmare for the rest of his presidency was that he'd be running for reelection against one of these hawks "with Ho Chi Minh running through the streets of Saigon."[2]

In the world of the 1960s, America was incomparably rich, commanding 40 percent of global GDP, compared with about 15 percent today. American wealth added to American confidence made *anything* seem possible. President Kennedy, after all, had pledged in 1962 to put a man on the moon before the end of the decade, and it was done—American astronauts walked on the moon in 1969. Militarily, the United States had fueled and equipped the Allies in World War II and put 16 million troops into Europe and Asia to defeat the Germans and Japanese. No one expected North Vietnam, which armed the twenty-year insurgency in South Vietnam, to pose much of a problem. It was, President Johnson snorted, "a raggedy-ass little fourth-rate country."[3]

And yet the United States had to fight North Vietnam cautiously. Politicians of both parties talked tough when it came to communism, but the Korean War, waged from 1950 to 1953, made presidents exceedingly cautious. In Korea, American-led forces had effectively won the war by October 1950, at which point Mao Zedong unexpectedly launched 300,000 Chinese troops into Korea and turned a short war into a long one that exasperated Americans, drove President Harry Truman from office, and was terminated with no formal peace treaty and a permanent garrison of American troops on the 38th parallel.

When President Johnson weighed sending American troops, aircraft, and ships to Vietnam in 1965, Korea was foremost in his mind. The Korean War had sunk the Truman presidency, and President Eisenhower had ended that war only by threatening to use nuclear weapons. With big, costly plans for his Great Society and War on Poverty, Johnson wanted to keep the conflict in Vietnam short and cheap. Above all, he wanted to forestall a Chinese intervention that would lengthen the war and suck funds from his cherished domestic programs. Like Eisenhower and Kennedy before him, he yearned to wash his hands of the war. But he didn't dare.

The consequences would have been severe. Senator Joe McCarthy's Red Scare had only flickered out in 1954, and Washington in the 1960s was still in the grip of a "China Lobby" inflamed by Mao Zedong's victory over Chiang Kai-shek in 1949. Henry Luce's popular *Time* and *Life* magazines, which gave busy Americans their worldview, purveyed the opinions of the China Lobby, chief among them the need to prevent any more defeats in Asia to communism. American voters wanted their politicians tough too. They didn't want Goldwater, but they didn't want to lose either. Getting out of Vietnam never would have been easy.

And so LBJ launched America's Vietnam War under the most bizarre circumstances. To fight the war on a low-cost basis without giving China any excuse to intervene, he opted for "graduated pressure" in North Vietnam. Instead of overwhelming the North with military power, LBJ would increase air strikes and ground troops *gradually*, each added increment theoretically demonstrating to the North Vietnamese the futility of resistance to the richest power in the world, which, the enemy would have to assume, was only getting started. Johnson didn't come up with this strategy on his own. It was fashioned for him by the presidential advisers he had inherited from Kennedy, chiefly Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy.

LBJ hoped that graduated pressure would also reassure the Chinese and Soviets that he was not aiming at the total destruction of North Vietnam. He hoped that his decision not to attack the neutral sanctuaries of Laos and Cambodia, where North Vietnamese troops and supplies moved on their way into South Vietnam, would serve as proof that Washington sought nothing more than a "free and independent South Vietnam." Naturally, this graduated pressure strategy succeeded only in persuading Hanoi, Beijing, and Moscow that Washington was not serious. A superpower that shrank from invading or even heavily bombing North Vietnam and that feared the odium of invading the "neutral" sanctuaries of Laos and Cambodia to close the Ho Chi Minh Trail was clearly a superpower fighting with one arm tied behind its back.

Graduated pressure, unfortunately, was never applied in South Vietnam. America's ally in the war was exposed to the full fury of the American arsenal: B-52s, batteries of field artillery, helicopter gunships, airmobile assaults, and "herbicide operations" with Agent Orange that stripped and poisoned much of the lush green country. Whatever affection the South Vietnamese people had for Americans withered away on a battlefield that spanned the entire country and led to the death of half a million civilians, mainly from American firepower.

The contrast between the deference and delicacy afforded North Vietnam and the ultraviolence unleashed in South Vietnam highlighted one of the war's great sins—its lack of strategy. Kennedy saw it not as a war but as a problem to be managed. Johnson saw it as a war that had to be artfully contained. "I am going to control from Washington," he said in 1965, a position from which he never deviated.

Neither JFK nor LBJ came up with a winning strategy, some way to fit military operations to political outcomes. The presidents talked about fighting to create a free South Vietnam, but they knew—and, one or two years into the war, most Americans knew—that the South Vietnamese nation was hopelessly corrupt and divided. As a result, there was no viable strategy, no way to segue from war to peace in an environment where the Viet Cong communists were always more feared and respected than the government in Saigon.

Starting in 1965, General William "Westy" Westmoreland filled the strategic void with his concept of "search and destroy." Westmoreland reasoned that if he would not be given the forces and authority to defeat North Vietnam and invade the neutral sanctuaries, he would defeat the enemy by killing so many of them that Hanoi would reach a "crossover point," where American-inflicted casualties would outnumber Viet Cong recruiting and North Vietnamese infiltration.

Search and destroy was what the American military did in Vietnam from 1965 to 1969. In view of its colossal ineffectiveness—only about 10 percent of search and destroy operations actually found the enemy—the body count it did inflict on the communists was a grim tribute to the efficacy of American firepower. An estimated 1 million enemy troops were chewed up by American ground and air attacks during the war.

And yet search and destroy failed because North Vietnam had 2.4 million young men of military age with 120,000 more reaching military age every year, and because corrupt, dysfunctional South Vietnam produced a steady stream of young recruits for the Viet Cong. Search and destroy failed because the Johnson administration and its generals did not appreciate just how different North Vietnam and the United States were. The United States was an affluent Western democracy that would tire of Vietnam as soon as it became a painful burden. North Vietnam was an authoritarian state fighting to unify and revolutionize Vietnam. Its aims and energy, buttressed by the resources of Moscow and Beijing, were unlimited.

And search and destroy failed because instead of securing South Vietnam, it destroyed it—literally. The United States defoliated one-seventh of South Vietnam's territory, obliterated countless villages, and created 5 million internal refugees in the course of the war. Through it all, Westmoreland was unmoved, obtusely assuring a journalist in 1967 that this self-inflicted devastation served a purpose: "It does deprive the enemy of the population, doesn't it?"

Westmoreland's robotic approach to the war explained why President Kennedy had been so wary of letting the US military into Vietnam. "Watch the generals," JFK remarked, "and avoid the feeling that just because they are military men their opinion on military matters is worth a damn." Once the US military got into any contingency, JFK complained, the demands of the generals—for money, personnel, and facilities—always soared. True to form, Westmoreland paved South Vietnam, built container ports and air bases, and positioned field artillery everywhere in the country, but never even sniffed victory. He made the war about operational art, not strategy. He focused entirely on planning, launching, and sustaining his costly and inefficient operations without ever fitting them to an achievable endgame and an enduring peace.[4]

Critics argued then, and still do, that had Johnson only permitted Westmoreland to do *more*—to attack Laos and Cambodia, to invade and pulverize North Vietnam—then the war could have been won. Beguiling as such arguments are, they are founded on nonsense. In fact, the Johnson administration looked at all of these possibilities and rejected them all not because of Johnson's caution but because none of them were *feasible*.

Vietnam became such a big war so quickly that there was never any slack in the system that would permit new commitments in Cambodia, Laos, or North Vietnam. There were many reasons for this. All are explored in this book. Casual observers regard 1969's peak American strength of 543,000 troops in Vietnam as a lot of manpower. It wasn't. Half a million American troops never yielded more than 80,000 combat troops, so great were the demands of logistics, maintenance, and other support functions. There was a moment in 1968 when Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, crushed by the war and its demands, calculated the total number of American personnel on the ground, in the sky, and on the seas around Vietnam and responded this way to a request from Westmoreland for more troops: "You have 1.2 million forces in Southeast Asia, and yet you've only got 50,000 or 60,000 in combat." In view of the military's high tail-to-tip ratio, there were never enough troops even to fight effectively in South Vietnam, let alone Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam.[5]

Ninety percent of American operations in South Vietnam never even located an enemy who would have been far more elusive in the vast forested spaces of Laos and Cambodia. Airpower availed far less than anticipated. Laos, site of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, was the most heavily bombed country in the history of the world during the Vietnam War, and yet all of that bombing never prevented the North Vietnamese from moving troops and supplies into South Vietnam. Only ground troops could, but there were never enough of them. There were over 1 million South Vietnamese troops paid for by American taxpayers. Pushed into Laos in 1971 to close the Ho Chi Minh Trail and demonstrate the success of "military Vietnamization," they met with a fate that revealed the true nature of the South Vietnamese military and its appalling leadership.

There was also the financial pinch. The war in Vietnam could not be broadened because there was no money for it. America was rich, but not so rich that it could afford both the new federal programs of LBJ's Great Society—an initiative even bigger than FDR's New Deal—and a costly foreign war. But even if LBJ and his Republican successor had chosen guns over butter, the price of Vietnam, even on LBJ's reduced-cost basis, was already backbreaking: half a million troops, 12,000 helicopters, 2,000 jets, and all of the ships, sailors, and aircraft of the Seventh Fleet. And this just scratched the surface. The daily consumption of fuel, parts, ammunition, and medical care was immense, and training and equipping 3.5 million South Vietnamese regulars and militiamen cost billions more.

Vietnam spending triggered inflation, which doubled in the United States between 1965 and 1967, and doubled again by 1970. The war created huge budget deficits, a run on America's gold reserves, and a hollowing out of America's defense preparedness, as every other account at the Pentagon (NATO, Korea, ICBMs, R&D) had to be plundered to pay for the insatiable costs of Vietnam. Quite simply, the war could not be expanded without even greater harm to the American economy and national security. Critics who wanted to expand and intensify the war never bothered explaining where they would have found the money and the troops to do so. Such is politics and, latterly, "revisionist history."

This book briefly summarizes the prehistory of LBJ's decision to commit ground troops to the war in Vietnam and looks closely at the years of American combat. It focuses as much on Nixon's war as on LBJ's, for the two were equally bloody and significant. Nixon ran in 1968 against LBJ's vice president, Hubert Humphrey, who took up the cudgels after Johnson, ruined by the war, declined to run for a second term. Nixon linked Humphrey to LBJ's "gradualism" and "camouflaged surrender" and vowed to do better. "Never has so much military, economic, and diplomatic power been used so ineffectively as in Vietnam," one of Nixon's campaign spots intoned.

But Nixon's presidency began with an act of subterfuge as disgraceful as any in "Tricky Dick's" shady political history. Nixon deliberately wrecked a peace deal that LBJ was close to sealing in October 1968 by opening a back channel to the South Vietnamese president, Nguyen Van Thieu, and urging him *not* to make peace. Thieu was assured through cutouts that Nixon would get him a better deal than Johnson or Humphrey could.

This naked act of ambition, consecrated on a second, entirely avoidable mountain of American dead and wounded, got Nixon elected in a close race by denying Humphrey an "October surprise." But Nixon now had to end the war himself and reveal his "secret plan."

The secret plan, such as it was, held that Nixon would repeal all of LBJ's self-denying ordinances—no bombing in North Vietnam, no invasions of Laos or Cambodia—and mend relations with Moscow and Beijing in order to detach them from Hanoi. In a war in which far too much was spent on

the relatively minor issue of Southeast Asia, Nixon and Kissinger gave away the store to Mao Zedong, who had ruthlessly overseen the deaths of 45 to 80 million of his own people in purges and famines. In the hope that Mao would rein in Chinese support for Hanoi, Nixon offered Mao the prospect of diplomatic normalization and a "One-China" policy from which Kissinger meekly removed every mention of America's military alliance with Taiwan. Nixon's attempt to expand the war into the neutral sanctuaries broke against the hard limits of the war. Congress refused to fund ground operations in Laos and Cambodia, and American citizens protested in unprecedented numbers when Nixon invaded Cambodia in 1970. The fury of those protests was in no way diminished by Nixon's timid rules of engagement, which were nearly as restrictive as Johnson's.

Another unhelpful facet of Nixon's "secret plan" was de-Americanization of the war, which his secretary of defense named "Vietnamization." It was supposed to proceed in careful, measured steps, but when Americans read about the Battle of Hamburger Hill in 1969 and others like it, they were so appalled by the brutish tactics and casualties in an obviously lost cause that Nixon felt compelled to pull American forces out precipitously, effectively wrecking Vietnamization and abandoning South Vietnam to certain defeat.

The military that Nixon led in Vietnam was demoralized by all of this self-serving chicanery. Johnson's "no-win war" had been bad enough, but the grunts were even more demoralized by Nixon's official change of the war aim—from battlefield victory to "peace with honor" and "buying time for South Vietnam."

To speak of any great military possibilities in the Nixon years is pure fantasy. The "Vietnam-only Army" inherited by Nixon was a curious phenomenon. Neither Johnson nor Nixon dared call up America's 1 million trained reserves, so the military in Vietnam relied entirely on draftees and "volunteers," young men who volunteered for noncombat jobs in order to avoid being drafted into combat units, where 88 percent of the grunts were draftees. This force began to fall apart in 1969, when the war was acknowledged by all to be futile. Drug use surged, race relations worsened, and the combat units began to practice "search and avoid" rather than search and destroy. Officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) who tried to coerce their soldiers into combat were ignored or murdered (fragged). Nixon's

attempt to reform the broken system in 1970 with a draft lottery only made things worse, as we shall see.

The dirty secret of Nixon's Vietnamization plan was that it was more about removing America's demoralized armed forces from Vietnam before they disintegrated, or before they suffered a series of catastrophic defeats in the field or even inside their bases. Force security and vigilance had become so slack by 1970 that commanders and politicians feared massacres of American draftees at communist hands.

The war, when viewed across all of its phases, tells us a great deal about the arrogance and limits of power. Compared to World War II or even Korea, Vietnam was fought with a derisory share of American GDP—only 3 percent in 1967. This led decision-makers to believe that they could eat their cake and have it too. They couldn't. The costs of the war kept rising, and funds could be found only by raising taxes and cannibalizing the defense budget. Media and popular opinion turned against the war and made it even harder to escalate.

For the historian, the most striking feature of the war was the cavalier way in which it was managed from beginning to end. Kennedy kicked the can down the road and was spared dealing with Vietnam in a more agonizing way only by his assassination in 1963. Johnson talked tough—"Nail the coonskins to the wall!"—but waged a war hemmed in by punctilious rules of engagement, economic limits, and a failure to decide what the war was really about or what the strategy was. Nixon promised to make "big plays" in Southeast Asia to break the deadlock, but the new president bumped up against the same political and financial limits that had constrained LBJ. Nixon ended up settling for the same peace deal that LBJ had negotiated four years earlier, a scandalous return on investment for all of the dead, wounded, and billions of dollars expended on Nixon's watch.

The Vietnam War is an unsettling, illuminating story of American power at its zenith. In the world wars of the early twentieth century, the United States had intervened with extreme reluctance. The nation had viewed wars as catastrophic in every way. After 1945, the United States was more willing to go to war. This was partly hubris and partly because national security was politically weaponized during the Cold War. Politicians had

to project toughness or risk ridicule and defeat. Wealth, power, and anti-communism inclined ordinary Americans toward intervention abroad in the early 1960s. Vietnam would reveal the weakness of Congress, the power of the presidency, the complicity of the general public, the might of the bureaucracy and armed services, and the ease with which these power centers can make and prolong even the most ill-considered wars, with ruinous consequences.

Chapter 1

PARODY OF HIGH STRATEGY

America's commitment to South Vietnam began under the most unpromising circumstances. China had fallen to Mao Zedong's communists in 1949. North Korea had nearly overrun South Korea in 1950, and then France, whose ten-year war to retain "French Indochina" had been funded by the United States, abruptly abandoned Southeast Asia in 1954. In Vietnam, France left behind two states: a communist North Vietnam with its capital at Hanoi, and a noncommunist South Vietnam governed from Saigon. North Vietnam held all the cards: a legendary leader, an industrial base, an army hardened by war, an inspiring message, and a land border with China. South Vietnam had little besides liabilities: an unpopular leadership, an agricultural economy, vulnerable land borders, an uninspiring message, and an army recruited from the old French colonial force. South Vietnam's long borders with Laos and Cambodia, great wilderness areas of old French Indochina, were simply too big to defend. Following the French retreat, they were left to their weak monarchies and to Chinese-supplied communist "forest armies" that were already jostling for power—the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the Pathet Lao in Laos.

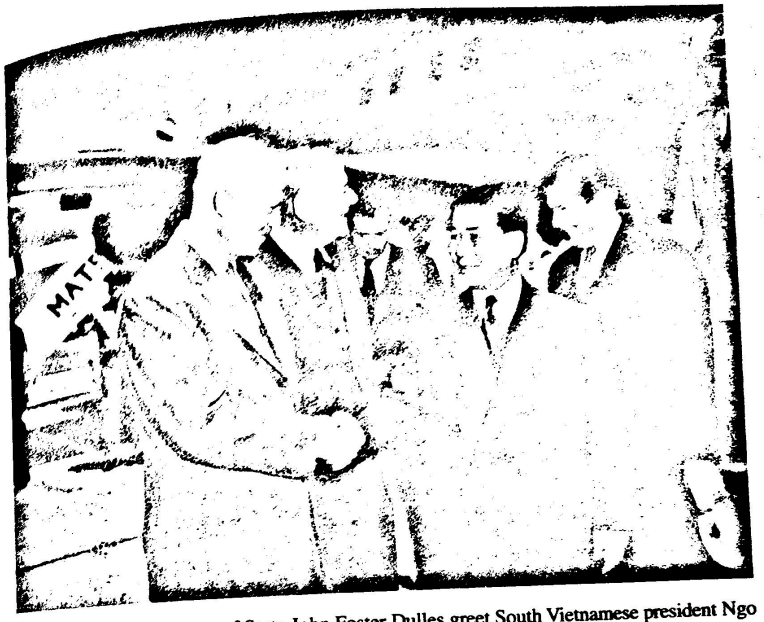
Sixty-three-year-old Dwight Eisenhower was president when France abandoned Indochina. Some of his military advisers had pressed him to

intervene at Dien Bien Phu, France's final defeat in 1954. The US Navy and Air Force had wanted to bomb the Vietnamese troops besieging the French, but the Army, led by General Matthew Ridgway, had reminded Ike of the American precept since Korea that there must be "no land wars in Asia." The continent had a history of luring armies to their death in its undeveloped spaces. Were ground troops needed in Indochina, Eisenhower was told, there would never be enough of them to pluck victory from such a vast theater of revolutionary war.[1]

Eisenhower stood down, but, fearful of the Red-baiting anticommunists gathered around Senator Joe McCarthy of Wisconsin, he poured military and economic aid into South Vietnam to prove that he took the communist threat seriously. Eisenhower wanted to do just enough for South Vietnam to keep Joe McCarthy off his back, but not too much. South Vietnam had so many liabilities that Ike did not want to be yoked to the place if it fell, which was always a strong possibility.

North Vietnam had a history. It was located in Tonkin, the most populous and developed part of Indochina. Its capital, Hanoi, was the finest colonial city in Asia. And its leader was sixty-four-year-old Ho Chi Minh—modest, affable, self-effacing, and admired by the Vietnamese people for having founded the Viet Minh national independence movement and driven out the French.

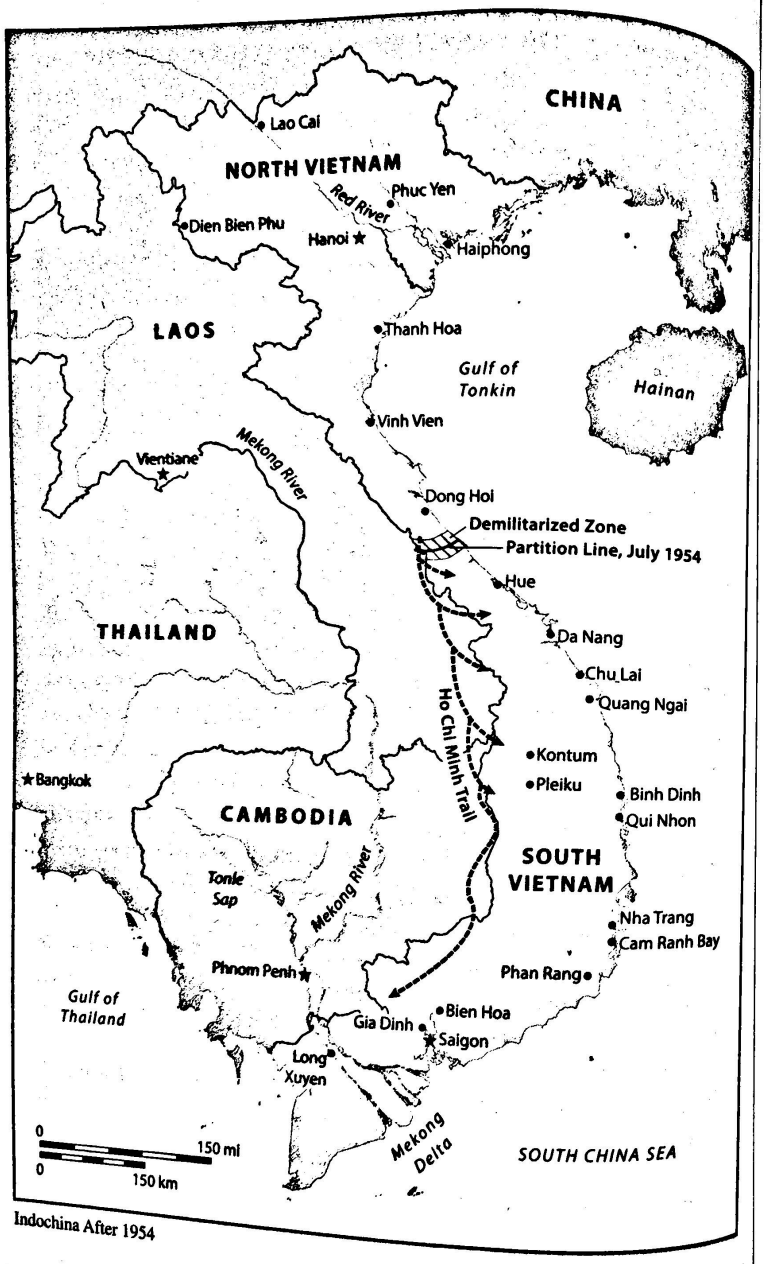
South Vietnam had no history. It was located on the southern tip of the Indochinese peninsula, named Cochin China by French imperialists deliberately in order to deny the existence of a Vietnamese nationality. Its capital was Saigon, an entirely new city built on a finger of delta land washed by the South China Sea. Cochin China's antipode was Annam, the northern half of South Vietnam, where the proud inhabitants of older cities such as Hue and Da Nang looked down their noses at the nouveau-riche hustlers of Saigon. South Vietnam's leader was an inherited French puppet emperor, Bao Dai, who gave way after just a year to his conniving prime minister, Ngo Dinh Diem, who kicked the emperor out of the country in 1955 and converted the monarchy to a republic, with himself as president. The fifty-four-year-old Diem was an austere Roman Catholic zealot in a lively nation in which Catholics, who were widely regarded as French collaborators, never amounted to more than 20 percent of the population.



Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles greet South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem on his state visit to the United States, May 1957. Eisenhower took the measure of Diem and was unimpressed, but still gave South Vietnam $1 billion in aid to appease American anticommunists. (National Archives)

Eisenhower took the measure of Diem and was not impressed, but he still funneled over a billion dollars of aid into South Vietnam before he left office. The two Vietnams were supposed to submit to elections for a unified country in 1956, but, knowing that the revered "Uncle Ho" would win those elections easily, Eisenhower instructed Diem to cancel the elections and declare the independence of South Vietnam instead. Eisenhower did this on the assumption that the more populous communist North Vietnam would simply absorb the less populous South Vietnam by fair means or foul. Still, it was not a good origin story for a new nation committed to "democracy" under "free-world" tutelage.

When Diem canceled the elections, the 10,000 Viet Minh "stay-behind" guerrillas, who had gone quiet for two years awaiting the nationwide ballot,



Indochina After 1954

resumed their struggle in South Vietnam to unify the country under the rule of Hanoi.

President John F. Kennedy took office in 1961 and was horrified by the situation he inherited from Eisenhower. Diem, who had lived in exile at the Maryknoll Seminary in Lakewood, New Jersey, in the 1950s and sold himself to politicians and journalists as a promising man of action, was not working out. Initially lauded by JFK as a "miracle man," a "third-force" statesman untarnished by association with the French or communists, Diem was none of those things. He was an unpopular, celibate, straitlaced loner who surrounded himself with family members and cronies, most of whom descended into corruption and tyranny.[2]

Eisenhower's billion had paid for a massive expansion of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN, always pronounced "arvin"). Kennedy continued the funding and inserted thousands of American military advisers to assist. Eisenhower had sent 700 advisers; Kennedy sent 15,000. All of this should have been sufficient to defeat the Viet Minh stay-behind guerrillas. To puncture their aura of saintliness, Diem renamed the Viet Minh "Viet Cong," which was a pejorative meaning "Vietnamese commie." He then reduced their numbers by 80 percent, to an estimated 2,000, through a vicious multiyear "Denunciation of Communists Campaign." That American-advised program of mass incarceration, torture, and massacre, which played out during Eisenhower's second term, had the unwanted effect of *increasing* the appeal of the Viet Cong. Diem jailed 20,000, killed thousands more, and ultimately generated more Viet Cong than he destroyed.[3]

Diem ordered whole villages believed to be in thrall to the Viet Cong to be annihilated in the late 1950s—places like Huong Dien, where ninety-two people were killed, two-thirds of them women and children. Diem authorized province chiefs to execute detainees on suspicion alone; there was no need for a trial. He ordered "mopping-up operations" in critical areas around Saigon like Bien Hoa, gouging out eyes, cutting off tongues, burning hands and feet, and displaying decapitated victims. The luckiest suspects were spared but forced to recant in ceremonies in which they would be ordered to spit on, trample, and burn portraits of Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh flag—still proud symbols of nationalist resistance to the French in every part of Vietnam—and to kneel and beg a merciful Diem for clemency.

Diem ordered the desecration of Viet Minh war memorials and graves, further alienating the Vietnamese.

It was a five-year-long flurry of unfocused violence and score settling all over the country as local officials took the "anti-treason laws" at the heart of the campaign as a convenient pretext to eliminate or dispossess their enemies, creditors, or rivals. Most of the victims had little or no connection to the communists, many of whom remained concealed in the villages and the government. The arbitrariness of it all merely deepened the sense of insecurity in South Vietnam and the impression of weakness around Diem. British novelist Graham Greene called Diem "the patriot ruined by the West."[4]

The US advisers sent to train the ARVN reported that it would not fight. The ARVN generals were as afraid of the Viet Cong as they had been of the Viet Minh, for they were the same dogged enemy. The generals were also afraid of reporting casualties to Diem, for he viewed fighting generals as a threat to his rule and demoted them or shunted them into powerless administrative jobs. The corps and division commands were given to loyal, passive Catholics. Initiative, valor, and aptitude were discouraged. The generals were expected to limit casualties, keep Diem in power, share their plunder, and take a cut of American aid dollars, 75 percent of which went to the ARVN.

With so much moral hazard on display, President Kennedy lost his early enthusiasm for Diem. But JFK didn't dare pull the plug. Like Eisenhower, he had to *appear* tough. Having begun his presidency with the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Kennedy needed a win somewhere to beat back Republican criticism that he was too callow to lead the global fight against communism.[5]

Kennedy's administration was full of hawks, chief among them Robert McNamara, the secretary of defense; Dean Rusk, the secretary of state; McGeorge Bundy, the national security adviser; CIA director John McCone; and White House military adviser Maxwell Taylor. These men prodded Kennedy deeper into Vietnam. Forty-five-year-old Bob McNamara, who had come to the administration from the Ford Motor Company, bubbled with optimism. America was so rich and powerful that it would prevail where the French hadn't.

Fifty-two-year-old Dean Rusk was a fervent anticommunist who saw the hands of Nikita Khrushchev and Mao Zedong behind every national liberation movement. Forty-one-year-old McGeorge "Mac" Bundy, the youngest dean in Harvard history, was the professor, who silkily explained that war could be waged in thin slices: pressure could be first "signaled" and then artfully increased to nudge an enemy as small and insignificant as North Vietnam toward surrender. Max Taylor was a retired general with a glittering resumé and the author of *The Uncertain Trumpet*, a book published in 1960 that called massive nuclear retaliation a strategic "dead end" and argued instead for "flexible response"—the ability to muster varying levels of force or capability to cope with the "entire spectrum of possible challenges," from insurgencies such as the one in Vietnam to nuclear war between the superpowers. Kennedy endorsed the book's arguments and brought Taylor onto his White House staff.[6]

These hawks in the Kennedy cabinet were reinforced by the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). This was the headquarters first established by Truman and Eisenhower to coordinate deliveries of military assistance to the ARVN. The American generals sent to Vietnam in the 1950s and early 1960s to run the advisory group had one thing in common: none of them ever submitted a candid report on the situation in South Vietnam. The nature of peacetime military organizations is to check boxes, fulfill requirements, and generate positive performance reviews. All of this could be achieved in South Vietnam in spite of the glaring defects of the operations there. ARVN units could be equipped, trained, and deployed. Their regular reverses in the field could be converted into victories on paper. The timidity of the well-armed South Vietnamese units and their failure to defeat the communists in battle could not be acknowledged without threat to the four-star MACV commander's career.

This scam became particularly notorious under the MACV commander selected by Kennedy. Fifty-seven-year-old General Paul "Ramrod" Harkins was sent out to Saigon in 1962 on the recommendation of Maxwell Taylor. Taylor's fingerprints would be all over the American intervention in Vietnam. He picked top commanders for it, and he pushed Kennedy in deeper.[7]

During Harkins' three-year tenure in Saigon, there was growing friction between his staff and the advisers attached to South Vietnamese units in the field. The most notorious example of this was Harkins' feud with Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann, described in detail in Neil Sheehan's Pulitzer Prize–winning *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (1988). Vann advised the ARVN 7th Division in the Mekong

Delta for two years. He reported in granular detail the failings of the ARVN, but also their total lack of interest in improvement. Other advisers besides Vann noted the incipient demoralization of a force in which urban French-speaking Catholic officers treated their rural Buddhist troops "like dirt." One adviser wondered if the United States was not unwittingly playing the role of "the British Redcoats during the American Revolution" by backing the ARVN. Harkins angrily suppressed such reports and sent Lieutenant Colonel Vann home to a desk job in the Pentagon, where General Max Taylor, whom Kennedy had reactivated in 1962 and made chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, took pains to ensure that Vann was given no opportunity to brief the lessons he'd learned in Vietnam to an influential audience.[8]

Everyone knew what Harkins was up to. The general routinely manipulated statistics and charts to show progress, and converted questions from the White House or the Pentagon about progress into templates for entirely fictional "headway reports" that would please the faraway civilians. "We are winning, this we know / General Harkins tells us so," jaded American advisers sang to the tune of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." President Kennedy tolerated this "lying machine" because it served his own political need to show progress in Vietnam and to keep the commitment small and cheap. Were Harkins to reveal the true state of the ARVN and the extent of his own incompetence, Kennedy would come under immediate pressure from hawks to commit more money, airpower, and personnel to Vietnam. It was easier, Kennedy reasoned, to pretend that all was well. In this way, reporter and historian David Halberstam observed, "the lie became truth" with JFK's connivance.[9]

Secretary of Defense McNamara also connived at war, from a strange mixture of fear and hope. The "SecDef," as he was known, feared the Joint Chiefs, who had no executive authority but nevertheless packed a heavy punch. They could whisper dissent to Congress or the press and trigger backlash against the administration. McNamara—increasingly the engine of the war, so much so that Vietnam was at this early stage referred to as "McNamara's war"—was himself a prisoner of that military bureaucracy.[10]

On the SecDef's regular trips to Vietnam in the early 1960s, he inevitably encountered dissidents—reporters, Army advisers, diplomats, aid workers, CIA agents—who told him that MACV's frothy progress reports were

An American infantry adviser wading through a rice paddy with an ARVN machine gun crew in August 1964. US advisers reported in granular detail the failings of the ARVN, but also their total lack of interest in improvement. (National Archives)

fabricated, what one reporter called "a parody of high strategy." But, like the president he served, McNamara didn't dare contemplate the alternative—a *real* strategy—for the simple reason that such a step would embolden the generals to ask for *more* force and resources in Vietnam. This they would assuredly do, either to reinforce the war in Vietnam or merely to get additional resources for Europe, Korea, and other theaters under the cloak of needs for Vietnam. This, in turn, would force McNamara to request more defense dollars from the president, which had to be avoided if McNamara was to remain a privileged insider at a time when Kennedy was trying to pass billions of dollars in tax cuts to energize the economy. McNamara became a vehicle for slow and steady escalation by claiming that things were going well enough for the war to continue.[11]

The one precaution Bob McNamara did take was to bring in the "whiz kids," bright young civilians from think tanks and universities, to check Harkins' work. They discovered the same trickery reported by Vann and

tolerated by Kennedy. Alain Enthoven, a thirty-one-year-old whiz kid from the RAND Corporation who ran McNamara's computerized Systems Analysis Office, discovered that the ARVN was faking operations to justify its existence. But none of this dulled McNamara's appetite for war in Vietnam. Like most of his peers in the can-do "GI Generation," the SecDef brimmed with confidence. Kennedy's conventional and nuclear force buildups and America's unrivaled economic might had redrawn the "map of power," McNamara declared in a speech. Even if the United States waged a carefully limited war in Vietnam to forestall Chinese intervention, McNamara thought it inconceivable that little North Vietnam could withstand even small increments of American power. "We have a $50-billion-dollar budget and this is our only war," McNamara chuckled to a general in 1961. "Don't worry about money."[12]

There were a few Cassandras in the Kennedy administration who warned against this overconfidence. Fifty-one-year-old George Ball, undersecretary of state, was one of them, cautioning Kennedy in November 1961 that "within five years we'll have 300,000 men in the paddies and jungles and we'll never find them again." But Kennedy shooed away these voices of reason. To secure reelection in 1964, he felt compelled to posture in Vietnam. His likely opponent, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, was already accusing Kennedy of "losing Indochina." Polls in 1963 showed Kennedy trailing Goldwater by 20 points in all eleven states of the old Confederacy and losing ground in the suburbs as well. Kennedy feared electoral defeat and another "Joe McCarthy scare" if South Vietnam fell to the Viet Cong insurgency.[13]

By the fall of 1963, the 25,000 Viet Cong (VC) guerrillas in South Vietnam controlled 80 percent of the country's 12,000 rural hamlets. Organized on Maoist lines, the VC waged revolutionary warfare. They went into rural areas that were corruptly administered by Diem and introduced clean administration. They insisted on the rights of the Vietnamese nation against foreign-controlled "puppets" such as Diem. They played Robin Hood, breaking up landed estates and distributing small plots to the villagers. Where incentives and propaganda failed, they inserted *dich van*, "moral intervention cadres." These were communist assassins, who killed thousands of hamlet chiefs, youth leaders, paramedics, teachers, police, and their families—making clear who was *really* in charge. Everywhere the VC took control, they redirected taxes from the government to themselves. Their numbers kept growing through the 1960s.[14]

Diem by 1963 was under attack by his own people. Buddhist monks, sick of the corruption, tyranny, and casualties of the war with the Viet Cong, launched a campaign of conscience against Diem. This "Struggle Movement" attracted thousands of ordinary people to its ranks—students, mothers, schoolchildren, and even government workers. The demonstrators made the connection between Diem and his American enabler. The cry went up: "The United States must either make Diem reform or get rid of him." Two years earlier, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy had waved away a question about Diem, saying, "We've got twenty Vietnams a day to handle." Now the one and only Vietnam came into focus.[15]

Diem, assisted by his brother Nhu, who ran South Vietnam's secret police and intelligence services, cracked down on the Struggle Movement, raiding and trashing the Buddhist pagodas of Saigon, Hue, and the other major towns of South Vietnam. Monks in their saffron robes were shot and beaten, others jailed. Students, thought to be a nexus between the Buddhists and the Viet Cong, were pulled from their university classrooms and tortured. Kennedy's vast increase in military aid and personnel in South Vietnam had resulted in a great increase in the press corps there too, from just two full-time American reporters at the start of his administration to a dozen in 1963, some of them with television cameras, which they now turned on the scenes of violence. Bill Bundy, one of Kennedy's whiz kids in the State Department, observed that in the summer of 1963 the president became "more preoccupied with Vietnam than at any previous time."[16]

Worse was still to come. On June 11, 1963, a seventy-three-year-old monk named Thich Quang Duc took the anti-Diem protest to a shocking new level. He sat in the middle of Saigon's busiest intersection, crossed his legs in the lotus position, drenched himself with gasoline, and set himself on fire. While the press shot photos and video and a horrified crowd gathered, the monk burned for ten minutes, sitting upright, his hands folded in his lap.

Images of the burning monk flashed around the globe. Six more monks and nuns burned themselves in the following weeks, inspiring massive demonstrations against the regime. What had been a South Vietnamese

Kennedy's administration divided over the issue of support for Saigon. Here a worried JFK discusses Vietnam with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor in October 1963. (JFK Library)

crisis—downplayed by the US embassy and MACV—suddenly became a political crisis for the White House that implicated Camelot in Diem's human rights abuses. Kennedy, one reporter observed, gave every appearance of subsidizing "a religious war against the country's Buddhists."[17]

Kennedy's administration now divided over the issue of a coup in Saigon. McNamara, Rusk, Mac Bundy, McCone, Taylor, and Harkins argued that the war was going as well as could be expected under Diem and that it would be unwise to rock the boat. The State Department split, Rusk supporting Diem but two of his powerful deputies—Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman—urging JFK to begin laying the groundwork for a "clean coup," in which the ARVN generals would seize power, unite the country, and fight the VC more effectively.

Kennedy's counterinsurgency adviser, Colonel Edward Lansdale, warned against a coup, characterizing the ARVN generals as "highly selfish and mediocre people squabbling among themselves for power while the Communists take over." The prime loyalty of each of South Vietnam's forty-eight generals was to his mentor, himself, and his hangers-on—certainly not to his country. Forty-eight generals, one contemporary wisecracked, provided forty-eight reasons for changing the status quo. Diem, at least, had the solid support of South Vietnam's Catholics. That was more grassroots support than any one general had. Taking it all in, the newly arrived American ambassador, sixty-one-year-old Henry Cabot Lodge Jr.,

counseled caution. With the ARVN generals so clearly lacking unity and courage, a coup now would be "a shot in the dark."[18]

A coup began to materialize—more from chance than from cold calculation. Playing a deadly game of musical chairs, the generals, many of whom were under surveillance by Diem and Nhu, finally rushed to end the game on their terms before Diem could end it on his. They were prodded along by Hanoi's most notorious double agent, ARVN colonel Pham Ngoc Thao, who used his crucial role as a regime security chief, trusted by Nhu, to push along the coup, which he correctly predicted would further destabilize South Vietnam. An already narrow political base would be made even narrower, "setting," as journalist Marguerite Higgins observed from Saigon, "the Vietnamese army at the throat of the Diem regime in the middle of a war."[19]

Colonel Thao, whose brother was Hanoi's ambassador to East Germany, assembled a force of 3,000 coup troops on his own initiative, but then yielded control to the two heavyweights: forty-seven-year-old General Duong Van Minh, known as "Big Minh" because he was six feet tall and 200 pounds, and the forty-six-year-old chairman of the Joint General Staff, General Tran Van Don. Decisive force was lent by thirty-eight-year-old General Ton That Dinh, who commanded Saigon and the thousands of troops of the III Corps region surrounding it. One of Dinh's more ambitious subordinates, General Nguyen Van Thieu, was the commander of the ARVN 5th Division at nearby Bien Hoa. Thieu had recently converted to Catholicism to ingratiate himself with Diem. He now hastened to join the plotters, securing his own brilliant future.[20]

The coup happened in the middle of the afternoon on November 1, 1963. With pro-coup forces surrounding the presidential palace, which was the old French Government House, Diem and Nhu fled to the fortified basement, where a $200,000 bomb shelter, radio transmitter, and command center with phones and maps had just been installed. They frantically called Ambassador Lodge, who had received a cable from Mac Bundy the previous day instructing him to let a coup under "responsible leadership succeed." Lodge told Diem that the United States government had no position on the unfolding coup. The frightened brothers then ran down a secret tunnel with nothing but a briefcase stuffed with dollars, emerged outside the palace, and found their way to St. Francis Xavier Church in Cholon—Saigon's Chinatown.[21]

Half of South Vietnam's army remained loyal to Diem, but that half was in the provinces and could not make its way to Saigon over blocked roads and bridges. Early the next morning, with coup forces searching the city for Diem and Nhu, Diem phoned General Dinh at the Joint General Staff and asked for safe conduct to the airport so that he and Nhu could go into exile. Diem had assumed Dinh would launch a countercoup, but Dinh did nothing of the sort. He first berated Diem and his brother—"Dinh saved you mother fuckers many times, but not now, you bastards. You shits are finished. It's all over"—and then he sent three armored cars to collect the Ngo brothers and drive them to the airport.[22]

Until the last, Diem and Nhu believed that the coup was a fake one to flush out plotters and that loyalists like Dinh would rally back to the regime at the critical moment. During the drive, the two leaders began to grasp that the coup was real. None of the highest-ranking generals came to escort them, and the general who did had been demoted by the Ngos and hated them. He placed them in an armored car with a major and Big Minh's forty-three-year-old bodyguard, Captain Nguyen Van Nhung. Nhung was Big Minh's aide-de-camp and in-house assassin. He had killed his forty-eighth victim for Big Minh the night before the coup, when he shot the commander of the ARVN Special Forces in the head for refusing to join the revolt. He was about to kill two more. Witnesses observed Big Minh make a pistol of his fingers and wave them at Nhung as he departed—a signal to kill the brothers and remove them as threats to the coup regime.

Back at Joint General Staff headquarters, most of the coup plotters still assumed that Diem was headed to the airport and into exile. But inside their armored car, Diem and Nhu, their hands tied behind their backs, began to quarrel with Captain Nhung, who then stabbed Nhu twenty times with a bayonet before shooting him and Diem in the head. When the armored cars arrived at the Joint General Staff headquarters, the waiting generals feigned anguish. None of the plotters wanted Diem and Nhu to escape abroad to found a competing government in exile, but they had promised the brothers safe conduct and an "honorable surrender." In the space of an hour, they had given their word and broken it.[23]

President Kennedy, apprised of the news in the White House, left the room "somber and shaken," as one witness recalled. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., then a special assistant in the White House, found JFK more depressed than

at any other time since the Bay of Pigs. The president had been trying to extricate the United States from Vietnam, yet this coup, which the world would assume he had facilitated, pulled him in deeper and tied him to whatever regime followed. "*Our* soldiers," adviser John Kenneth Galbraith had warned Kennedy on the eve of the coup, "cannot deal with *the* vital weakness": Saigon's inability under *any* regime to defend and legitimize its government. Galbraith pleaded with JFK to stop listening to the hawks, or "we shall replace the French as the colonial force in the area and bleed as the French did."[24]

Three weeks later, Kennedy himself lay bleeding in Dallas. Hours after that, his fifty-five-year-old vice president, Lyndon Baines Johnson, unexpectedly ascended to the Oval Office. As vice president, LBJ had been a minor player on Vietnam. Never privy to Kennedy's inner doubts about the war—only aware of the president's public statements of support—Johnson felt that by taking a hard-line position on Vietnam he was continuing Kennedy's policy, an illusion encouraged by Kennedy's hawkish advisers, all of whom Johnson retained. Just days after Kennedy's murder, LBJ baldly stated his position on the war to Ambassador Lodge, who had flown to Washington to meet with the thirty-fifth president but instead met with the thirty-sixth. "I am not going to lose Vietnam," Johnson vowed. "I am not going to be the president who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went."[25]

The junta that Kennedy had tepidly encouraged proved even worse than Diem. It was unconnected to the masses, and arguably more French than Vietnamese: General Tran Van Don had been born in the Gironde and educated in France. Big Minh had attended the top French colonial high school in Saigon before going abroad to study at the École Militaire in Paris. He was almost theatrically lazy, skipping meetings to tend his orchids, feed his exotic birds, or play tennis. General Le Van Kim, Don's brother-in-law and co-conspirator, had attended film school in Paris. Nguyen Ngoc Tho, the civilian premier, was the Catholic son of a rich southern landowner and Diem's former vice president. Having no idea what to do, the generals had kept him on in the hope that he would, despite the fact that he had blood on his hands from the Buddhist crisis.

These compromised men were nothing like the hard-core, admired nationalists of Hanoi and the VC. They were soft and doubting, and surprised to find themselves in charge. They would draft land and tax reforms to

ease the burdens of the South Vietnamese peasants and to appease Washington, and then internally sabotage those same reforms because they and their political allies owned the lands and benefited from tax loopholes that they had no intention of closing.[26]

It was exactly the opposite of the successful system implanted by Ho Chi Minh, where VC fighters penetrated villages or refugee camps and established shadow governments that addressed the needs of the poor, rooted out corruption, and exposed the precariousness of government control. As a senior VC official put it, "We never propagandized communism; instead, we say: the peasants are the main force of the revolution." They pitched it as a battle between rich and poor, town and country, corrupt and incorruptible. Neil Sheehan, who covered Vietnam for the Associated Press and the *New York Times* in the 1960s, noted that the communists were the only truly national organization spanning North and South Vietnam and, Sheehan noted, "the only party representing revolution and social change, for better or worse according to a man's politics." Most South Vietnamese were poor, and their politics increasingly aligned with the Viet Cong and their promise of security, rice, land, and dignity.[27]

A second coup followed three months after the first. This one, headed by thirty-six-year-old General Nguyen Khanh, was propelled by younger officers who felt snubbed by the first junta, among them the two generals who would overshadow South Vietnamese politics for the remainder of the war: thirty-three-year-old Nguyen Cao Ky and forty-year-old Nguyen Van Thieu. Khanh's coup was nearly bloodless. The only casualty was the officer who had assassinated Diem and Nhu, Nguyen Van Nhung, now a major. Big Minh's bodyguard was hustled into the garden of a Saigon villa by one of Khanh's officers and shot in the back of the head as he kneeled over his own grave. It was the same method Nhung had used to execute the commander of ARVN Special Forces three months earlier. No one was ever charged with the murder of Major Nhung, a detail that perfectly illustrated the murky, incestuous politics of South Vietnam.[28]

The military impact of both coups was disastrous. After the second coup, President Johnson sent McNamara to tour the country with General Khanh at his side—to make clear that Khanh was "America's man"—and to gather information on what Dean Rusk was calling "the dirty, untidy, disagreeable war." Big Minh had been deposed for taking seriously a proposal

by French president Charles de Gaulle that South Vietnam proclaim itself a neutral state as a possible means of ending its civil war. Khanh had been thrust forward by his colleagues and the US embassy team because he made all the right noises about fighting to the bitter end, growling that he would be equally hard on communists and "the traitors who advocate neutralism."[29]

McNamara came back from his muddy-boots tour discouraged, reporting in March 1964 that, in their zeal to remove their rivals, the two juntas had effectively destroyed the rural administration of South Vietnam *again*. Thirty-five of forty-one province chiefs had been replaced. Ten provinces had run through three or four different chiefs in three months. "Almost all of the major military commands had changed hands twice"—once after the Diem coup, and then again after Khanh's January coup. No one was taking charge of the situation, and the Viet Cong were advancing. The Vietnamese air force, always on "coup alert," was not interdicting the enemy or supporting the ARVN. Panicked US advisers raised the alarm. More villages were falling under communist control. The VC seemed unstoppable.[30]

LBJ agonized over the optics of this emerging fiasco and sought for ways to cram Vietnam back into the shadows. A bellicose Joint Chiefs faction led by General Wallace Greene of the Marines and General Curtis LeMay of the Air Force were pestering him to "either get in or get out." Johnson convened the Joint Chiefs on March 4 and described his "hold-until-November" strategy: "I've got to win the election . . . and *then* you can make a decision."[31]

LBJ feared the service chiefs as much as Kennedy had—they could leak and make him "look like an ass," as he put it—and the president kept Maxwell Taylor on as chairman to keep them in line, which Taylor did, for now, assuring the chiefs that LBJ was going to use Vietnam as "a laboratory, not only for this war, but for any insurgency." Johnson expressed growing doubts about Vietnam to McNamara. There couldn't be anything "as bad as losing," LBJ told the SecDef, but the president couldn't see "any way of winning."[32]

Strategy for the unfolding war would have to fit the requirements of Johnson's 1964 reelection campaign. McGeorge Bundy's military aide said the obvious—that Vietnam was being treated as "a political football," so that LBJ could pose on the eve of the election as the candidate of peace and stability against Goldwater, who was notorious for his casual advocacy of war. LBJ despised the cigar-chomping, warmongering LeMay, but

he renewed the general's term as Air Force chief of staff in January 1964 so that LeMay would not retire and go public with his opposition to the "hold-until-November" strategy.[33]

LBJ's frivolity in the matter of war contrasted with Hanoi's severity. By now, fifty-six-year-old Le Duan had moved from the southern insurgency back to Hanoi, where he had been named first secretary of North Vietnam's communist Workers' Party. Le Duan saw a closing window of opportunity—the Americans still not fully committed and the South Vietnamese floundering from one junta to the next. He wanted to deploy every available resource to the war effort immediately. But first Le Duan had to override the caution of Ho Chi Minh in the politburo. He did this with remarkable audacity, inventing a "theory of two mistakes." Le Duan accused Ho Chi Minh of failing to prevent the French return to Indochina in 1945 (the first mistake) and then accepting the two-state solution for Vietnam at Geneva in 1954 (the second mistake). Le Duan then impeached his other rivals for power with this theory and purged them as "revisionists," "humanists," and "rightists." Le Duan retained seventy-three-year-old Ho Chi Minh as a beloved but increasingly powerless figurehead while acquiring dictatorial powers for himself.[34]

McNamara, Mac Bundy, and the Joint Chiefs hoped that US bombing would turn the tide against this energized communist regime. If the South Vietnamese generals could not keep their country on the warpath, maybe American bombing would. The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that LBJ "put aside his self-imposed restrictions" and "take bolder action." The chiefs wanted a devastating air campaign to hit every node of power in North Vietnam. Johnson, fearful of Chinese intervention and the probability of heavy civilian casualties, didn't dare authorize *that*. And so McNamara selected "graduated pressure" instead of the "hard knock" pushed by the chiefs. The SecDef falsely assured the president that the generals considered graduated pressure "acceptable."[35]

In this way, McNamara, Mac Bundy, and Max Taylor got their way with minimal opposition. Air strikes could be increased to punish Hanoi and reduced if Hanoi slackened its support for the Viet Cong. The rationale for Operation Rolling Thunder—the forty-four-month air campaign against North Vietnam that would begin in 1965—was being worked out. The Joint Chiefs (privately) judged it "well below the minimum activity that the situation demands." Like everything else in the war, it was notable for its conceptual muddle and divorce from Vietnamese realities.

Flexible response, Kennedy's overhaul of Eisenhower's massive nuclear retaliation strategy, permitted a leader to work up the ladder to whatever level of force was needed to defeat an enemy. But LBJ's "graduated pressure" concept blocked the upper rungs—major ground war, nuclear war—and sought to deter an enemy merely by "signaling" that more damage *might* follow if the enemy did not negotiate. "The history of warfare contained no precedent for such a policy," General William Westmoreland, who would soon replace Harkins, later observed. The only rationale for graduated pressure, in Westmoreland's view, was if means were accumulating slowly, as in the world wars or Korea. If you already had the means—and the mighty United States certainly did—the only rational course was to use them at once to win. McNamara was not so sure. Why pursue "victory," the SecDef deftly countered, if the United States could achieve its political goals simply by threatening more air strikes?[36]

The theory, with its emphasis on winning without fighting, might have been cribbed from the pages of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. But how well could it work in this scenario? Hanoi under Le Duan was determined to win at any cost, and air raids in the North would not make the ARVN fight harder, or create peace and stability in the South, which seemed to be imploding, not improving. Bob McNamara held a pivotal position in all of this. Johnson was in awe of him, called him the "smartest man" he had ever met, and liked to say that when McNamara was in the room "you could almost hear the computers clicking."[37]

But McNamara's brilliance was also his Achilles heel. He did not factor in the fog and friction of war. The SecDef believed, as he put it, that America's "vast power" could be carved into slices—this much for Europe, this much for the Middle East, this much for East Asia—and then "unleashed to the precise degree required by whatever threat we face." To control that "vast power" and mollify LBJ, McNamara had to control the generals as well, which was becoming more difficult. The Joint Chiefs read MACV accounts of the worsening military situation in Vietnam and wanted big hunks of power, not thin slices. The Air Force and the Navy wanted to bomb targets in North Vietnam, and the Army wanted to attack the VC in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.[38]

The Joint Chiefs ran a war game in April 1964 called Sigma I, which tested the "graduated pressure" idea conceived by Mac Bundy and McNamara and concluded that it would fail. The guerrilla war in South Vietnam would intensify if the United States shifted resources to a bombing campaign in the North. "Graduated pressure" would merely lengthen the war without winning it—stiffening Hanoi's resolve and weakening America's. McNamara so feared upsetting Johnson that he did not even mention Sigma I and its conclusions to the president.

By 1964, the SecDef hardly even bothered consulting with the Joint Chiefs. Their meetings were increasingly content-free, likened by one participant to "a mating dance of turkeys" that "solved no problems." This was because McNamara was turning the brewing war in Vietnam over to his whiz kids, treating their quantitative analysis—body count, kill ratio, weapons captured, air sorties—as more predictive of how the war might go than the extrapolation of a war game, where players did what their gut, analysts, and history told them that hostile and friendly forces would do under different levels of stress.[39]

The State Department's Policy Planning Council did its own forecast of an American bombing campaign and came to the same conclusion as Sigma I: that it would fail and that it would drag the United States deeper into an unwinnable war. Bombing would fail because the North Vietnamese were not fighting a limited war and would not flinch at bluffs and physical destruction. It would fail because damage to North Vietnam's industrial plant and infrastructure would merely cause the Soviets and Chinese to pour in more aid, or even intervene militarily. It would fail because the United States and its free-world allies would appear to be killing innocent civilians from the air. It would fail because instead of deterring Hanoi it would provoke Hanoi to escalate the war, sending more infiltrators, weapons, and supplies into South Vietnam to punish the American pressure. Bombing would do little to stiffen South Vietnamese resolve or morale. If bombing failed—which it almost certainly would—American troops would have to be sent to stabilize the Saigon government. With American troops on the ground, pressure would build for LBJ to take over *every* aspect of the war. "Once on the tiger's back," George Ball warned, "we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount."[40]

Chapter 2

NO-WIN WAR

The State Department report of February 1964 spelled out the reality that would dog the war effort in Vietnam: it was unwinnable under all conceivable scenarios. An embarrassment to the administration, the report was closely held and hastily revised. In April 1964, Johnson ordered a National Intelligence Estimate on the same question, and this one—orchestrated by the CIA and shaped by military assertions of the efficacy of bombing—came back positive. Bombing *would* work. This suited LBJ better. He wanted to force a consensus and get everyone on board early. He confined discussion of the growing Vietnam problem to Tuesday lunches, where the three heavyweights, McNamara, Bundy, and Rusk, would "coordinate" their counsel before going into the lunchroom—to placate Johnson with what Rusk called "common conclusions." In LBJ's administration, Mac Bundy observed, "anything less than 100 percent support was rank desertion." Doubters were taken as signs of weakness—and silenced or sidelined.[1]

Irving Janis, a research psychologist at Yale University, studied the inner workings of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and coined a new concept: "groupthink." In essence, it was what was happening now—presidential advisers were valuing membership in the in-group higher than any other consideration. They "overcommitted to past decisions and ignored challenging intelligence reports" to keep in step with the boss and each other, and to avoid relegation to the powerless out-group—

the humiliating fate of doubters such as Bill Trueheart (recalled from the Saigon embassy for finding fault with the South Vietnamese government), Roger Hilsman (replaced in the State Department by Mac Bundy's brother Bill), and Averell Harriman (exiled to African relief operations). Even George Ball, who remained with the in-group, did so only because, as a colleague put it, he let himself be "cuckolded" by the president: heard but ignored. All of this was a welcome development for administration hawks, the "mindguards" of the in-group, who were now spared the ironic asides and second-guessing of Jack Kennedy's skeptics.[2]

One of those skeptics, Mike Forrestal, who would himself be banished to the out-group in July 1964, was startled to receive clandestine visits in the White House from Bob McNamara's hawkish deputy John McNaughton in the spring of 1964. McNaughton, who did not dare host Forrestal at the Pentagon because the White House aide was regarded as a dove on Vietnam, would slip into the White House after hours to share his doubts about the war with Forrestal. Bombing, McNaughton feared, was nothing more than a "gimmick" in the absence of strong and popular government in Saigon. The war could be won only by an effective South Vietnamese regime, precisely what was lacking and what would probably never emerge. In one of their chats, Forrestal assured McNaughton that if everything failed, the United States would cut its losses and get out. No, McNaughton replied: "The trouble with you, Forrestal, is that you always think we can turn this thing off, and that we can get off of it whenever we want. But I wonder. I think if it was easy to get off of it, we would already have gotten off."

Working killer hours at the Pentagon as McNamara's deputy, McNaughton knew just how overpowering the US military's commitment to any major operation like Vietnam was. "I think it gets harder every day," he told Forrestal. "Each day we lose a little control, each decision we make wrong, or don't make at all, makes the next decision a little harder because if we haven't stopped it today, then the reasons for not stopping it will still exist tomorrow, and we'll be in even deeper."[3]

In May 1964, the *Wall Street Journal* characterized American policy in Vietnam as "error upon error." There was no apparent plan, the paper wrote: "It is almost impossible to figure out what is U.S. strategy." To quiet criticism like that and keep the generals onside, Mac Bundy's National Security Council (NSC) worked on a plan to "hurt" but not "destroy" North Vietnamese capabilities in the hope that Hanoi would see the trend lines and withdraw its support for the VC. This blossomed into an NSC "Projected Course of Action on Southeast Asia" on May 25 that called for "military action with more deterrent than destructive impact." Pressure, in other words, would be applied gently—to avoid goading the enemy into overrunning South Vietnam.

LBJ's war planning resembled a political science seminar. There was no military involvement, no major targets, no clear objectives, just a lot of words. McNamara boasted of his newfound ability to "fight a limited war without the necessity of arousing the public ire." The Joint Chiefs tried to break into this closed civilian circle, insisting in a memo on May 30, 1964, that the objective must be to "accomplish the destruction of North Vietnamese will and capabilities, to compel them to cease providing support to the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos," but Max Taylor, in his last act as chairman of the Joint Chiefs before departing to replace Lodge as ambassador in Saigon, suppressed the memo and threw in with the political scientists, recommending on June 5 nothing more than "demonstrative strikes against limited military targets to show U.S. readiness and intent."[4]

Taylor made a virtue of this deceit, which he defined as seeing the problem "through the eyes of the president," being "more than a military man," and "attenuating the differences between the civilian and military authorities within the Department of Defense." In a word: groupthink. With Taylor shutting off military advice and straining to remain relevant and powerful in a new administration, the president's approach to the conflict appeared flabbier and more purposeless than ever.[5]

To give it some muscle and purpose, LBJ accepted the resignation of Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., and in July 1964 named Max Taylor to be the new ambassador to South Vietnam, with broad powers and instructions to right the ship in Saigon. Johnson had kept Lodge on to give Vietnam policy a bipartisan flavor, but he now saw opportunity in letting Lodge go home to battle Goldwater for the Republican nomination. Taylor, a now twice-retired general with a heroic military record, offered bipartisan cover without Lodge's cantankerousness.[6]

Taylor, a virtuoso of the org chart, secured from LBJ total control of "the whole military effort in South Vietnam," including the appointment of one of his most loyal protégés, fifty-year-old General William "Westy"

Westmoreland, first as Harkins' deputy, and then to replace Harkins as MACV commander that summer. Max Taylor was now, as the deputy director of the CIA put it, "the coach, the quarterback, and the captain of the team" in Vietnam.[7]

But the coach's glittering career was starting to dim. Averell Harriman, one of JFK's favorite contrarians, had tartly taken the measure of Taylor: "He is a very handsome man, and an impressive one, and he is always wrong." But Johnson, like the Kennedys, was still in awe of Max Taylor and hoped that the smooth-talking general might succeed in forging consensus between all of the groups warring over Vietnam policy—the Army, the CIA, the State Department, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. With the election drawing near, LBJ also saw Taylor as insurance against Republicans who might call the president "soft" on communism and too enamored of nation-building. "Win the war," Johnson told Taylor, and stop fussing with "social concerns" in Saigon.[8]

Harkins had departed Saigon in June 1964, leaving the four-star MACV command to General Westmoreland. Westy was a prodigy—the scion of a South Carolina military family that had served in the Revolutionary War. First in his class at West Point, Westy had fought in the North African and Italian campaigns in World War II, where he met and impressed Max Taylor. After the war, Westy commanded the 101st Airborne Division, served as superintendent of the US Military Academy, and was a young three-star general in 1963 when he attracted the attention of Kennedy and McNamara, who viewed Westmoreland as the energetic type who would clean up the mess left by Harkins and carry the ball to victory in Vietnam.

"Accentuate the positive," "Bring best thought to bear," and "Avoid frustration and stagnation" were Westmoreland tag lines that endeared him to McNamara. On his way to Vietnam, Westmoreland stopped at West Point to lecture the gathered cadets on leadership and remind them that "knowledge is not the chief aim of man—action is." The mark of a true leader, Westmoreland declared, is the "positive approach." A general who had served under Westy in the past foresaw disaster ahead: "He is spit and polish, two up and one back. This is a counterinsurgency war, and he would have no idea how to deal with it."[9]

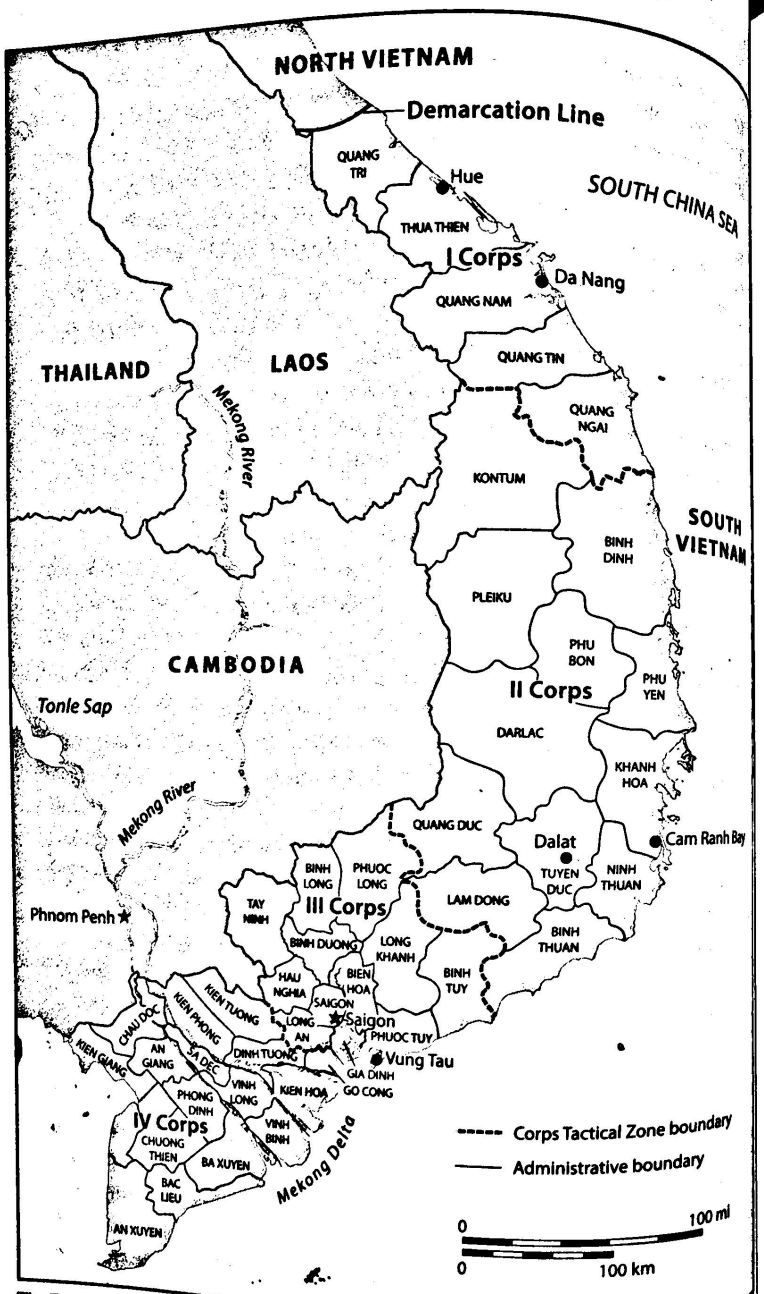
Arriving in Vietnam, Ambassador Max Taylor was shocked to discover that the war was being lost far more rapidly than he had imagined from

his perch in Washington. There were more VC than he had believed, and more VC activity. To tame and harness the southern guerrillas, Le Duan had reinforced the Viet Cong with teams of northern infiltrators, and taken control of the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), which was the VC's political and military headquarters. COSVN cemented northern control of the southern insurgency and brooked no opposition.

The most tangible result of this power struggle was the expansion of well-equipped, well-trained Viet Cong main-force units. These were VC battalions organized as regular troops, entirely interchangeable with North Vietnamese Army (NVA) battalions if for no other reason than that most of their replacements during the long war of attrition would be NVA recruits and officers. Le Duan and COSVN would use VC main forces—trained, directed, and manned by NVA personnel—as the surest way to bring South Vietnam's Viet Cong under North Vietnamese control.[10]

In 1964, Le Duan sent General Nguyen Chi Thanh, who had monitored ideological purity in the NVA, to run COSVN and centralize all Viet Cong resources. This he did, improving VC regiments and deploying the first VC divisions as main-force "fists" capable of shattering larger ARVN units in conventional battles. By the time Max Taylor arrived in Saigon, the reorganized VC had taken more than half of South Vietnam's territory and population under its control. This explained Taylor's shock. Using his broad new powers, Taylor instructed Westmoreland to skirt Pacific command in Honolulu, known as CINCPAC, as well as the Joint Chiefs, the usual channels for force requests, and go straight to the White House with a call for 4,200 additional US military advisers that was immediately (and secretly) granted, raising the number of US troops in Vietnam to 22,200. From Washington, Rusk cautioned Taylor not to "confirm total numbers" and to "refuse to describe future plans." LBJ needed to hide the war from the public until after the November 1964 election.[11]

Phony optimism, rebranded as the "positive approach," would characterize Westmoreland's headquarters no less than Harkins'. Westmoreland and his deputy, General Dick Stillwell, became instant virtuosos at the game. One of Westy's "headway reports" from the summer of 1964 showed how it was done. The report, which covered South Vietnam's four corps areas from north to south, was supposed to summarize American adviser reports for decision-makers in Washington. Unfortunately, the adviser reports were



The Four Corps Areas of South Vietnam

universally negative. In I Corps, always pronounced "Eye Corps," the northern region abutting the demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating North and South Vietnam, US advisers described a crisis atmosphere. South Vietnamese militia forces summoned to "hold" ground "cleared" by the ARVN were all but useless. Hue and Da Nang were deeply divided between political factions. Key province chiefs were under investigation for corruption. In the II Corps region, where the Central Highlands and the mountain passes of the Ho Chi Minh Trail descended to South Vietnam's coastal plain, there was open conflict between the South Vietnamese government and the ethnic minorities who lived in the mountains. Only 25 percent of military recruits conscripted in this region actually heeded the draft call, and most of that small number vanished before they could be inducted.

In III Corps, the densely populated region around Saigon, the ARVN was resorting to defoliation missions to beat the VC, spraying their hideouts from the air, but not daring to meet them in battle. Whenever they drove out to find the VC, their convoys were blown up by mines and ambushes, and their helicopters shot down by .50-caliber machine guns seized from careless ARVN units. Civic action cadres—the young South Vietnamese social workers who were supposed to live in the rural hamlets, organize basic services, and propagandize against the VC—refused to spend the night in *any* of the hamlets of III Corps. They knew that they would be murdered or abducted if they did.

In IV Corps, the Mekong Delta, VC kidnapping was up 300 percent month over month, and acts of sabotage were up 25 percent. American advisers measured a 94 percent increase in VC activity that was met with a 10 percent *decrease* in ARVN contacts with the VC. ARVN divisions hardly maneuvered. They lived in army camps alongside their dependents, who feared VC reprisals if they remained in their villages. This need to defend parents, wives, and children against communist attacks meant that the ARVN rarely strayed from its base camps, and never for long periods of time. When Westy had arrived in Vietnam in January 1964 he was startled to discover this fact as well as another: that "the South Vietnamese simply called off the war—or ignored it—on weekends and holidays and took long siestas at lunch time." Nothing had changed in the meantime.[12]

Everywhere, US advisers described South Vietnamese counterinsurgency measures as "nullified" or "paralyzed" by apathy, fear, and corruption.

The colonels and generals responsible for the defense of South Vietnam's cities and provinces spent most of their time selling government jobs and draft exemptions or embezzling funds and materials. They routinely used their troops and vehicles to smuggle drugs and other contraband, or sell American-supplied fuel and other commodities to the Viet Cong.

American advisers warned that control of the country was fast slipping away—if not already gone—and yet here is how Generals Westmoreland and Stillwell summarized for the White House the dismal reports that they received from all four corps areas in 1964: "In general, though deficiencies and problem areas still exist, optimism among U.S. advisory elements continues to grow. A sense of purpose and direction is beginning to materialize." Overall, the MACV commander lied, "the month [of June] has had the effect of crystalizing thinking into a firm philosophy of winning the war on all fronts." Of September 1964, for which the adviser reports were even more dire, Westmoreland assured the president that, "overall, morale and combat effectiveness is satisfactory." Westy, no less than Harkins, was willing to traffic in fibs if they served his purpose of expanding the war and validating his command.[13]

Groupthink like this, however, could get President Johnson only so far. It ensured the loyalty of his handpicked inner circle, but not of Democratic liberals carping about the waste and hypocrisy of the war. Nor did it appease Goldwater Republicans and anticommunist Democrats, who complained about the meagerness of American support for South Vietnam, or the uniformed military, whose loyalty to Johnson was contingent on getting what they wanted from him. Leaks were already becoming a problem. Senator Goldwater, groping for a foothold in his run against the incumbent president, accused Johnson of having "weakened the bonds of confidence between civilian leaders and the nation's top military professionals" and having "bypassed seasoned military judgment in vital national security issues." It wasn't hard to figure out where those slurs were coming from.[14]

President Johnson suffered a series of setbacks in 1964 that made him look weak on national security. In February, VC guerrillas attacked the US advisory compound in Kontum City in the Central Highlands, and then bombed a theater in Saigon—killing three Americans and wounding fifty. In April, the VC overran Kien Long, a district capital in the Mekong Delta, killing 300 ARVN troops. In May, two VC commandos attached explosives to the hull of an American ship docked in Saigon harbor and sank it, killing five American sailors. On the Fourth of July, the VC seized the US Special Forces camp at Nam Dong, killing two more Americans, as well as fifty South Vietnamese. In Washington, Republicans railed that LBJ was preparing for "retreat or defeat." In Saigon, General Khanh challenged Johnson to do more: "The United States must take a firm course, so that North Vietnam knows it is not a paper tiger."[15]

A majority of American voters as yet ascribed little importance to foreign policy questions—least of all Vietnam—but Johnson wanted to forestall *any* election-eve embarrassments. He increased aid and shipments of matériel, and in June 1964 he began angling for a congressional resolution of support for his Vietnam policy—a resolution that would force politicians of both parties to support him on patriotic grounds, persuade the military brass that he would stand and fight, frighten Hanoi and Beijing, and release him from his political restraints on Vietnam. But for that he needed an *incident*, something that would galvanize the American public and turn them herd-like against North Vietnam.[16]

The incident arrived in the first days of August 1964. It sprang from another facet of Johnson's "hold-until-November" strategy—covert operations. With Khanh's junta pressing for more muscular American assistance, which LBJ did not dare offer before the elections, McNamara had been busy cooking up various "black ops" against North Vietnam to keep Khanh quiet and test the SecDef's graduated pressure theory. South Vietnamese saboteurs and spies were parachuted across the 17th parallel with little success, often because the paratroopers, knowing they were on suicide missions, reported for duty drunk so that they could not be flown into action. More promising, from McNamara's perspective, were covert raids on North Vietnamese targets by high-speed South Vietnamese patrol boats guided by US Navy destroyer patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin. These raids, launched from Da Nang, drew more North Vietnamese motor gunboats into the area to resist the incursions. By shelling communist radar stations along the littoral, McNamara hoped to "send the message" that at sea no less than in the air the United States could tighten its grip at any time. "Leave your neighbors alone," Rusk challenged Hanoi. "If you don't, we will have to get busy."[17]

On August 2, 1964, two American destroyers—the *Maddox* and the *Turner Joy*—had a run-in with three fast North Vietnamese patrol torpedo (PT) boats. With no international agreement on territorial waters until 1982, US destroyers had been routinely pushing to within four or five miles of the North Vietnamese coast since 1962 on "watchdog patrols" to study coastal defenses and locate Soviet radars and antiaircraft missiles in the Tonkin Gulf. This time, three North Vietnamese PT boats, reacting to the presence of the American warships near the mouth of the Red River Delta, motored out on August 2, fired torpedoes, missed, and were set upon and destroyed by F-8 Crusaders launched from the USS *Ticonderoga*. The two destroyers returned on August 3 to "show the flag," and that night they fought a confused action in a rainstorm against a phantom enemy.

No one aboard or in the air actually detected any North Vietnamese boats on August 3 or 4. The skipper of the *Maddox*, Captain John Herrick, later allowed that his crew had made no visual sightings of enemy vessels. Commander James Stockdale, who flew from the *Ticonderoga* to counter this second communist "attack," also saw no targets on the sea beneath him. Sonar operators on the American ships reported what they thought *might* be approaching torpedoes, but there were no impacts.[18]

LBJ knew that his administration had provoked the attacks with its own covert operations against North Vietnamese radar sites. Those attacks, code-named OPLAN 34-A and delivered by South Vietnamese PT boats, had been kept secret from Congress and the American people for three years. The president also knew that the communist naval attacks alleged on August 4 may not even have happened. Neither of the American warships had seen an enemy boat, or even a wake. Sonar operators could mistake any noise for a torpedo contact. "For all I know, our Navy was shooting at whales out there," Johnson laughed. But it was no laughing matter for the congressional leaders he summoned to the White House at 6:15 p.m. on August 4. LBJ, who had already given the order for carrier air strikes on several North Vietnamese targets, informed the lawmakers that North Vietnamese attacks had been confirmed, even as his Pentagon was confessing (internally) that it had no "positive evidence."[19]

Just before midnight, Johnson went on television from the Oval Office and informed the American people that he had ordered strikes against North Vietnam for its "open aggression on the high seas against the United

States of America." For Johnson, this phony "Tonkin Gulf incident" offered political cover at a pivotal moment. He had just passed the bruising Civil Rights Bill of 1964, which overrode Jim Crow laws in the South but had to survive a furious sixty-day filibuster by Republicans and southern Democrats. With the November elections approaching and liberal voices criticizing LBJ's commitment to South Vietnam as too generous and conservative voices decrying it as insufficient, the Tonkin Gulf dustup, if deftly converted into a congressional resolution, would allow LBJ to do four things: wrap himself in the flag, neutralize Vietnam as a political issue, hide the scars of civil rights, and bind both parties to a "wartime president."[20]

Lyndon Johnson, whose political deftness was legendary, got what he wanted out of the Tonkin Gulf incident. The president had maneuvered his protégé, Arkansas senator J. William Fulbright, into the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1959 when Johnson had been Senate majority leader. LBJ now called in the debt, pressuring Fulbright, who opposed the escalating war in Vietnam (and had filibustered against civil rights), into cramming discussion of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution into just nine hours of committee work and floor debate, totally dominated by the deceitful testimony of McNamara and Rusk.

Opponents of the resolution had wanted real hearings, to call military and civilian critics of the war, and to limit or defeat the resolution. Bill Fulbright, answering to Johnson, had refused, citing the "emergency" situation in Vietnam. The real reason was that Johnson did not want to be confronted with "disagreeable questions," such as: Was this a blank check? What amounts of force were being authorized? Why was such a resolution needed at that moment, or ever? With the floor to themselves, McNamara and Rusk cloaked themselves in secrecy, assuring the senators that they knew things that they could not divulge in an unclassified setting, that the North Vietnamese had ambushed the American ships, and that there had been no American provocation. President Johnson accused Hanoi of "shooting at our ships over 40 miles from their shores." This was the beginning of the "credibility gap," which would bring down the Johnson presidency. The president, McNamara, and Rusk were not telling the truth.[21]

In fact, the *Maddox* and the *Turner Joy* had been part of a McNamara-devised covert operation to goad the enemy into switching on their radars so that they could be targeted, and to protect South Vietnamese PT boats,

which were attacking North Vietnamese naval bases under a secret program managed by the CIA. The North Vietnamese had actually been defending themselves, not launching unprovoked attacks. Johnson, McNamara, and Rusk told Congress none of this. McNamara lied to Congress, assuring both houses that there had been no American involvement in the raids on North Vietnam. General Earle "Bus" Wheeler, who had replaced Max Taylor as chairman of the Joint Chiefs, did not contradict the lies. Bus Wheeler was a new kind of general, one who had been groomed as an organization man by McNamara. He was a uniformed bureaucrat who would do what he was told. And Wheeler's connivance was ultimately unnecessary. With Fulbright himself managing the floor debate and cutting off inconvenient questions, the joint resolution passed 88–2 in the Senate and 416–0 in the House on August 7, 1964.[22]

Johnson successfully cast the incident as an attack on American honor and his response as "limited and fitting." Determined to reassure voters that he was not a war hawk like Goldwater, LBJ weirdly pledged that "my firmness will always be measured." The two senators who voted against even measured firmness, Wayne Morse of Oregon and Ernest Gruening of Alaska, had nearly been joined by several others, including Republican Jacob Javits and Democrat George McGovern, who feared that the resolution would be used by the White House to usurp the Senate's war powers.

Johnson, through Fulbright, assured wavering senators that he too had no appetite for a "land war in Asia," and that the resolution was intended merely to speed the delivery of urgent air or naval attacks "to deter the Chinese Communists and North Vietnamese from spreading the war." To doves, Johnson stressed his "peace motive and readiness to negotiate." When the votes were tallied, Morse called the Senate's acquiescence "a historic mistake." The resolution gave the president broad war powers. "Like grandma's nightshirt," LBJ joked, "it covered everything."[23]

But how exactly could Johnson *use* that new power? In his campaign against Goldwater, who had been nominated at the Republican convention in July, Johnson was promising that he would "not send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves." LBJ was running as a peace candidate against a Republican nominee promising finally to win the "no-win war" prolonged by Kennedy and Johnson. That left air strikes—war with as few *American* deaths as possible—as the only feasible option.

LBJ insisted that the strikes be sharply limited to avoid the kind of images that would blemish a Johnson candidacy: blasted schools or markets, dead civilians, broken dikes, flooded villages, or, if the bombing crept too far north, Chinese intervention. Ambassador Taylor wanted aggressive reprisals to reassure Saigon that the United States would not "flinch from direct confrontation with the North Vietnamese." The Joint Chiefs wanted a "heavy effort" to establish what they called an "outer parameter" of violence that America was willing to inflict. Specifically, they wanted to bomb Hanoi and the port of Haiphong, but Johnson did not dare go that far. "We are not going to take it lying down," he told a Republican senator, "but we are not going to destroy their cities."[24]

A new war game at the Pentagon was organized in September 1964 to test the effectiveness of limited bombing in shoring up South Vietnam and deterring North Vietnam. The game would test Mac Bundy's thesis that air strikes could be meted out in a calibrated way to hurt the North Vietnamese just enough to "reduce or eliminate their support for the insurgency." Inevitably, the Air Force again sent their "heavy effort" man: "Old Iron Ass" himself—Curtis LeMay, chief of the Air Force staff. Kennedy had famously wrestled with "Bombs Away LeMay" during the Cuban missile crisis, when the four-star general had wanted to bomb and invade Cuba, even at the risk of nuclear war. LeMay, who months earlier had been satirized in Stanley Kubrick's film *Doctor Strangelove*, joined Bill Bundy and John McNaughton on the Blue (US) Team in the war game, and squared off against a Red (Hanoi) Team led by Army chief of staff Bus Wheeler.[25]

The game, code-named Sigma II, was played over ten days in mid-September 1964 and ended badly for the United States. Bombing the infiltration routes from North to South Vietnam had scant effect because the infiltrators traveled light, with little or no logistics tail to betray their movement. Bombing North Vietnamese military installations had little impact because they could be moved and camouflaged. If the United States mined or blockaded the port of Haiphong, the North Vietnamese would "punish" the escalation by sending additional infiltrators into South Vietnam. With an army of 250,000 men constantly replenished by more than

2 million draft-age males and presumably backstopped in an emergency by the hordes of China, the North Vietnamese could reinforce the VC by sending as many battalions south as the Ho Chi Minh Trail infiltration routes could handle.[26]

If the United States bombed North Vietnamese airfields, the Red Team moved women and children onto their remaining airstrips and announced to the world that they were there—daring the Americans to slaughter them under the glare of television cameras. Inside South Vietnam, the VC, directed by General Wheeler's Red Team, shifted their attacks to places known to contain American advisers and support troops. To prevent those Americans from being killed or captured—politically disastrous for LBJ—LeMay's Blue Team felt compelled to send in US Marines for force protection. The Red Team responded to *that* escalation by sending yet more infiltrators down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Washington could not credibly accuse the North Vietnamese of aggression or interference in the affairs of South Vietnam when the United States was itself bombing the North and sending ground troops into the South, radically upsetting the military balance on Hanoi's southern border.

When LeMay's US Marines arrived in-country, Wheeler's VC set to work mining and ambushing all of the roads and railways used by the logistics-heavy Americans, forcing them to supply themselves by air, and then shooting down the resupply aircraft with their heavy machine guns. That would not be a good look for Johnson either, in any year, let alone an election year. The Viet Cong themselves, Ambassador Taylor would shortly report from Saigon, had invincible morale and "the recuperative powers of the phoenix." They fought to the last man and had no difficulty replacing their casualties with eager new recruits. "Fresh recruits believed entirely what they were told," a VC defector reported in 1964. "That's why most of the Front's real achievements are made by the young."[27]

With LeMay's Americans stalemated, a second game was played, this one loosening the rules of engagement. LeMay shifted the aerial bombing farther north, cutting the rail links between North Vietnam and China. China reacted by sending 50,000 troops into North Vietnam to take over essential labor and defense tasks and free up still more North Vietnamese troops for infiltration to the South. The air campaign having failed to "coerce" North Vietnam out of the war, the US Blue Team began introducing American ground troops in an expanding torrent. By game's end, the United States had *ten* 15,000-man US infantry divisions in South Vietnam, but they still failed to win, or even turn the tide.

Sigma II predicted the losing or deadlocked course of the war to come. The communist Red Team played with the assumption that the American public's support for the war would wane the moment they grasped that it was protracted and costly. The game mocked the academic conceits behind graduated pressure: that the "U.S. would not buckle," that "the U.S. could meet *any* level of escalation that the enemy might mount." In fact, the rural, agricultural economies of North and South Vietnam made it hard to escalate decisively, as did the unknown positions of Beijing and Moscow. Yet none of the major players were prepared to accept the inevitability of failure. George Ball thought that priority should be given to publicizing "rules of engagement which would appear 'fierce'"—a perfect encapsulation of the mincing LBJ approach.[28]

LeMay reacted bitterly to the Blue Team's inability to inflict real damage on Hanoi. Between games, the Air Force general complained to Mac Bundy about the strict rules of engagement and insisted that more targets be made available—levees, cities, ports, factories, oil depots—even at the risk of heavy civilian casualties, exactly what Johnson needed to avoid if he was going to keep Congress, the press, overseas allies, and the American people on board. We're swatting at flies, LeMay grumbled, when really we should be going after the manure piles—the sources of North Vietnamese power. This was the occasion for LeMay's most famous line: "We should bomb them into the Stone Age." Noting the paucity of major industrial targets and infrastructure, Mac Bundy suavely replied: "Maybe they're already there."

LeMay had argued for hitting ninety-four targets in North Vietnam after the Tonkin Gulf incident. LBJ had consented to a small number of them, leaving the big "manure piles" untouched. But even when they hit all ninety-four targets during Sigma II—the "hard knock" desired by LeMay—it did nothing to deter the North Vietnamese, weaken their support for the southern insurgency, or get peace talks started. These findings implied a long, grinding, indecisive war, which the American people would reject. The games, held to fine-tune an American bombing campaign intended to scare the North Vietnamese to the peace table without alarming the American public with evidence of a real war, returned a dismal verdict. American

ground troops *would* be needed to backstop Saigon. Mac Bundy urged the president to consider a "grim alternative"—two brigades of US Marines as "good medicine everywhere." He warned LBJ that if the president was the "first to quit in Saigon," he'd lose at least as much domestic political support as Truman had lost after Mao's victory in China.[29]

And yet America could not "tear it all down" from the skies, as LeMay advised, for all of the usual reasons plus another: Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev had explicitly warned LBJ that to do so would risk nuclear war between the superpowers. Even if LBJ had been willing to risk that—he wasn't—the political fallout at home and abroad would have been too toxic. How could the mighty leader of the free world inflict a humanitarian catastrophe on little North Vietnam and emerge with its benevolent image intact? The bombing would *have* to be limited, yet the American generals could point to no scenario in which Hanoi's will to continue the war to victory was broken by limited bombing—what Bob McNamara and Mac Bundy called "slowly walking up the ladder."[30]

The generals themselves were deeply divided, making it easier for McNamara to ignore the results of Sigma II and continue with graduated pressure. Fifty-two-year-old General Harold "H.K." Johnson, a survivor of the Bataan Death March, replaced Wheeler as chief of staff of the Army when Wheeler became chairman of the Joint Chiefs. In internal debates, H.K. rejected LeMay's view that heavy bombing could be decisive. He also spurned General Wallace Greene's view that US Marine "enclaves" sprinkled around South Vietnam could turn the tide. The war, General Johnson said, was an indigenous insurgency and had to be fought at its roots with larger troop numbers than the Marines could ever provide—in South Vietnam, but also in Laos and Cambodia, where the communists sheltered on neutral territory and moved their infiltrators and supplies.

But the Army chief of staff had no appetite for such a war. He told LeMay and Greene, thirsting for that "hard knock" against North Vietnam, that they were being "illogical." Modest American pressure was already backfiring, spurring more, not less, communist activity. "More severe pressure," H.K. predicted, will only "increase and intensify the insurgency in the South." When the chiefs finally agreed on a joint memorandum outlining a Vietnam strategy in October 1964, it read just like McNamara's: use air strikes to "demonstrate resolve, increase pressure," and force Hanoi to "cease support of the insurgency" by hitting targets "in ascending order of severity." This was hope, not strategy.[31]

From Saigon, Ambassador Taylor warned McNamara that war games weren't enough. South Vietnam was failing, and the United States would have to take over the war against the VC. Previously, Taylor had opposed an American air campaign on the grounds that it would relieve pressure on Saigon to fix its internal problems and fight and win the war. Now he wanted not only American planes and pilots but as many as 100,000 ground troops as a "last resort." To critics such as George Ball, who argued that South Vietnam was too fragile to justify the commitment, Taylor argued that it was precisely because of that fragility that troops and aircraft had to be put in: "Failure in Southeast Asia would destroy and severely damage our standing elsewhere in the world." Vietnam, Taylor argued, was an "experiment" in thwarting communist insurgencies, and the experiment *had* to succeed.[32]

President Johnson remained torn, even after his landslide victory over Goldwater on November 3, 1964, when he won 61 percent of the popular vote and 90 percent of the Electoral College, gained 37 seats in the House, and achieved control of the Senate with more than a two-thirds majority. Johnson was keenly aware that his landslide was *not* a mandate for military escalation—quite the contrary. Fearing Goldwater's pugnacity, Americans had elected Johnson to keep the peace and launch his Great Society. There was scant media or political pressure for escalation in Vietnam in 1964. Only about 25 percent of Americans supported military action in Vietnam at the time. Seventy-five percent supported negotiations with Hanoi. Eighty percent opposed the introduction of US ground troops. LBJ had considerable freedom of action to wind down the war, if only he could hit upon a face-saving formula.[33]

With a massive legislative agenda teed up to crown and surpass FDR's New Deal, LBJ understood that a big war in Southeast Asia might unravel everything. The president had declined to react two days before the election when the Viet Cong had mortared the air base at Bien Hoa, killing five Americans, wounding seventy-six, and torching a half dozen aircraft sent to Vietnam after the Tonkin Gulf incident to "signal" American resolve. Taylor and LeMay had called for immediate reprisals, but Johnson had paused to consult the pollster Lou Harris. Harris warned the president that reprisals

were just "the sort of thing people would expect from Barry Goldwater and probably the main reason they are voting for *you*." LBJ stood down, privately assuring the Joint Chiefs and Taylor that *after* the election he'd take the gloves off and hit hard.

The VC exploded a bomb in Saigon's Brink Hotel on Christmas Eve, killing two more Americans and wounding fifty-eight, narrowly missing the delayed arrival of entertainer Bob Hope and his troupe—there for the first of nine annual Vietnam Christmas tours. The president hesitated again. The most obvious complication was the certainty that if America sent its own forces into South Vietnam, North Vietnam, which already interpreted the Tonkin Gulf Resolution as a declaration of war, would reinforce the Viet Cong with more infiltrators as well as regular army units—trained, camouflaged, motivated, well-armed divisions of the North Vietnamese Army. In November 1964, the first NVA units began marching down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to infiltrate South Vietnam. If Washington dropped its advisory charade, Hanoi would drop its VC charade and accelerate this takeover of the war in the South.[34]

Like Kennedy, Johnson squirmed in frustration. There was no "cause" in Saigon, just a quarreling junta of generals described by Ambassador Taylor as "lethargic, irresponsible, discouraged, and divided." The Air Force chief of staff, General Curtis LeMay, wanted to skirt the political problem with a massive knockout blow: hit every target in the North, pierce the dike, levee, and dam system that protected the low-lying Red River Delta from catastrophic flooding, and do it all at once. If you weren't allowed to hit it, you shouldn't be allowed to go to war, LeMay reasoned.[35]

Johnson worried that bombing and drowning civilians would be a public relations catastrophe, and that targeting harbors, factories, and military bases would almost certainly kill Chinese and Soviet advisers, possibly bringing those powers into the war as active combatants. Khrushchev, who had ceded the Vietnam issue to Mao's China, had been forced into retirement in October 1964 and replaced by the more aggressive leadership of Leonid Brezhnev, who regretted Khrushchev's failure to react forcefully to the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, and offered Hanoi a military alliance and the promise of advanced weaponry such as surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). Mao, now in direct competition with Moscow for the leadership of world communism, could do no less.[36]

George Kennan had predicted that the two great communist powers would fall out, weakening international communism, and they had. But for North Vietnam, their split in the early 1960s was a blessing. It meant that Ho Chi Minh and Le Duan would have two great powers behind them, both anxious to outbid the other in their support. Looking at the situation, Army chief of staff Harold Johnson shared LBJ's doubts. A war in Vietnam, he said, would be a lot like Korea, with the United States forced to fight another interminable "accordion war," launching attacks, pulling them back, and ceding initiative and sanctuaries to the enemy to limit escalation.

President Johnson, who had been offered nothing but light, medium, or heavy bombing as options by his advisers in November 1964 after the Bien Hoa attack, recoiled in doubt and disgust. "This bombing bullshit," he snarled, would not be enough. Yet what *might* be enough was not politically feasible. He raged at the CIA's inability to tell him what was going on in Hanoi—*who* were the key players, *what* were they thinking, *how* would they respond to American bombs? "I thought you guys had people everywhere, that you knew everything, and now you don't even know anything about a raggedy-ass little fourth-rate country," he growled to CIA director John McCone. The president burned with frustration. He had trounced Goldwater and secured Congress' assent to an escalation of the war effort, yet no one could tell him how to win, or even how to get the North Vietnamese into peace talks. Incredibly, the nature and eventual outcome of the Vietnam War were acknowledged before Johnson even began his massive escalation of the conflict.[37]

Chapter 3

EVE OF DESTRUCTION

LBJ had seemed poised to escalate the war the minute victory over Goldwater was in the bag. He had promised General Earle Wheeler that he was "going to do something" after the election, but he now drew back from the brink—again. In late November 1964, the president reviewed plans for action against North Vietnam and chose the one least likely to inflame Hanoi and its superpower allies: "present policies plus additional forceful measures, followed by negotiations." Johnson clearly wanted to rid himself of the war as quickly as possible, a fact not lost on Hanoi. Two months of administration war planning in November and December 1964 by an interdepartmental group and the Joint Chiefs yielded more political science—a plan dubbed "progressive squeeze and talk."

As LBJ prepared for his new term with commanding majorities in the House and Senate, he totted up the projected cost of his Great Society programs and discovered that there was no room in the budget for a war in Vietnam. A short list of Great Society "asks" included tax cuts, medical care for seniors and the poor, college tuition grants, farm subsidies, infrastructure, welfare, low-income housing, clean air and water, and urban renewal. With the peacetime military already eating up half of the federal budget and 10 percent of GDP, where would LBJ find the money for such an ambitious domestic agenda? Even if the war in Vietnam went well, rising defense expenditures would hand Republicans and southern Democrats a club to kill the Great Society. Many of them had

opposed Kennedy's tax cuts on the grounds that they were fiscally irresponsible. They would leap at the chance to kill the Great Society.[1]

President Johnson would have dimly recalled that every communist removed from the battlefield in the Greek Civil War, waged with American aid from 1946 to 1949, had cost the CIA about $50,000. Numbers like that made Johnson flinch. At conservative estimates, there were already at least $15 *billion* worth of communists needing to be removed from the battlefield in South Vietnam, a fact confirmed by the president's economic advisers, who pressed him to seek a $10 billion pay-for-the-war tax increase. Johnson was horrified. The Republicans, he burst out, would "take the war as their weapon; they'll be against my programs because of the war; they'll say we're not against the poor, but we have this job to do, beating the Communists."[2]

Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield implored the president to pull back and not go "further out on the sagging limb" of Vietnam. But just after the inauguration in January 1965, Mac Bundy and Bob McNamara pushed the president further out on the limb. They warned LBJ that he faced a "disastrous defeat" if he did not move beyond "the middle course" he had been on since Kennedy's assassination. "Harder choices" had to be made.[3]

It was no longer enough to "prop up the authorities in South Vietnam," McNamara argued. The only sure way to contain China was "with a determined display of military power." Dean Rusk concurred. Losing South Vietnam, he said, would mean losing Southeast Asia: "Country after country would give way and look toward Communist China as the rising power of the area." Bill Bundy recommended sending US ground forces and increasing air attacks to "signal" Hanoi and "stiffen" Saigon. Mac Bundy, Bill's younger brother, sniffed that Americans would just have to "pull up their socks" and go to war if the South Vietnamese wouldn't do it themselves. He urged the president "to *use* our military power in the Far East to force a change of Communist policy."[4]

Johnson's vice president, fifty-three-year-old Hubert Humphrey, warned Johnson *not* to escalate. "American wars," Humphrey wrote the president in February 1965, "have to be politically understandable by the American public." This one was not—and, in view of the chaos and drift in Saigon, never would be. American citizens "looked in vain for a cogent, convincing case." They were "worried and confused." They could not be made to understand "why we would run grave risks to support a country which is totally unable to put its own house in order." Humphrey warned LBJ that escalating the war would fracture the Democratic Party and make the president the "prisoner of events" in Vietnam.

President Johnson angrily put Humphrey "in limbo" after this exchange, excluding the vice president from NSC meetings on the war and shifting him from the in-group to the out-group. Outwardly bluff—laughing that "Humphrey is all heart and no balls"—the president inwardly shared the vice president's doubts. LBJ felt trapped and miserable. There seemed to be no path to peace other than surrender. Calls for a cease-fire in South Vietnam were simply ignored by the VC and Hanoi, who knew that Johnson had no appetite for war.[5]

On the eve of the 1964 election, candidate Johnson had told a rally in New Hampshire that, if elected, he would "get [the South Vietnamese] to save their own freedom with their own men." The *New York Times* was already breathing down his neck, asserting on November 25 that "if an Asian war is to be converted into an American war, the country has a right to be told what has changed so profoundly in the past two months to justify it." There were now 23,300 American military personnel in South Vietnam, and 168 of them had been killed or captured in the course of 1964. More would surely follow those men to the grave. The First Lady recalled that Johnson had trouble sleeping at night. "I can't get out," he told her, and "I can't finish it with what I've got, and I don't know what the hell to do."[6]

While LBJ tossed and turned, the VC intensified their attacks in South Vietnam. Having struck Bien Hoa air base in November 1964 and Saigon at Christmas, the VC struck again in February 1965, this time mortaring Camp Holloway, the sprawling American base at Pleiku in the Central Highlands, where many of the North Vietnamese forces descending the Ho Chi Minh Trail turned into South Vietnam. Eight more Americans were killed, 126 were wounded, and twenty-five aircraft went up in flames as VC mortars raked the airfield and VC guerrillas breached the perimeter and sprayed the compound with fire. The attack coincided with Mac Bundy's visit to Saigon and also with a visit to Hanoi by Soviet premier Alexei Kosygin with an entourage of Soviet generals to fine-tune military assistance programs for the NVA and VC.[7]

Mac Bundy flew immediately to Pleiku with Generals Khanh and Westmoreland. They surveyed the damage and recommended the heavier air

strikes that LBJ had been resisting: Operation Flaming Dart I. These would be the first strikes on North Vietnam since the raids following the Tonkin Gulf incident six months earlier. Three American carriers were on station in the South China Sea ready to bomb North Vietnam. In Washington, President Johnson convened an NSC meeting to consider options, and all present, including George Ball, recommended retaliation, as did the Joint Chiefs. "All the services were anxious to get a foot in the door," an Army general on the Joint Staff recalled. Mac Bundy sent LBJ a memo warning that if he did not strike now defeat was "inevitable, within the next year or so." American "prestige," Bundy wrote, was "directly at risk."[8]

Until now, Mac Bundy had shrugged off American casualties in Vietnam as no more numerous or problematic than the number of traffic fatalities in the streets of Washington, DC. But after Pleiku, the national security adviser threw caution to the wind and persuaded Johnson that launching a serious "policy of graduated and continuing reprisal" was the best course. Even if we suffer heavy casualties and lose, Bundy assured the president, we will strengthen American "credibility" by fighting. "Pleikus are like streetcars," Bundy joked; when one comes along, you have to be ready to hop on. Support for escalation in the White House was owed again to groupthink—Humphrey's exclusion from the inner circle a warning to all—as well as Ambassador Taylor's panicky calls from Saigon for action. The CIA station had counseled against bombing, predicting that any benefit would be outweighed by massive North Vietnamese escalation of the war on the ground. Taylor forwarded the CIA analysis to the White House only after removing all references to Hanoi's likely escalation.[9]

Johnson, oblivious to Taylor's subterfuge, then called in Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield and sought his opinion. Until now, the United States had tried to keep on the fringes of the war, with 23,000 military personnel in an "advise and support" capacity in South Vietnam. Direct American military action would raise the stakes and potential for escalation enormously. "I would negotiate; I would not hit back; I would get into negotiations," Mansfield advised. Intervention, Mansfield continued, would not only ensnare the US military in an open-ended conflict, it might lead to war with China, and might even repair the Sino-Soviet split.

It would not do, Mansfield cautioned, to *help* the two great communist powers mend fences through American overreach. Bill Bundy, who was there, felt the tension in the room, respect for Mansfield colliding with a determination to do *something* and to appease Republican hawks such as House minority leader Gerald Ford, who was also at the meeting—pressing for more and heavier air strikes.[10]

"I just don't think you can stand still and take this kind of thing," President Johnson cut in. "You just can't do it." Doing nothing would be "another Munich," a reference to the Western democracies' notorious appeasement of Hitler on the eve of World War II. Voters would not respect him if he let the VC "kill American boys in their tents." Johnson surveyed the room and added: "I've kept my shotgun over the mantel and the bullets in the basement for a long time now." It was time to take the shotgun down and bring the bullets upstairs. The president then went on television to address the American people—"We shall pay any price to make certain that freedom shall not perish from this earth"—and gave the order to launch Operation Flaming Dart I: strikes by forty-nine attack aircraft from two carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin.[11]

The jets stormed aloft and hit NVA barracks and radio shacks just north of the 17th parallel. The South's Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) chipped in a wave of its own strike fighters, one of them flown by junta member Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky. When the first American jets attacked Dong Hoi, General Khanh, who called the VC "the arms of the enemy monster [whose] head is in Hanoi," popped the cork on a bottle of champagne to celebrate America's active involvement. Congress signaled its willingness to "pay any price," promptly voting $2.4 billion for combat operations in Vietnam.[12]

Undeterred, the VC attacked a hotel housing Americans in Qui Nhon the following day. They killed the ARVN guards at the front door, placed a massive charge under a central staircase that supported the hotel, and blew it. Four stories flopped to the ground, crushing twenty-three more American soldiers to death. Johnson now authorized Flaming Dart II—ninety-nine American attack aircraft from three Navy carriers, and about thirty US Air Force F-100 Super Sabres flying from bases in Thailand to hit targets north of the line drawn for Flaming Dart I.

The raid was designed by the Joint Chiefs to hit seven targets but was restricted by Johnson to two, neither of which was destroyed. Johnson and McNamara were this time spared LeMay's fulminations because the Air Force chief of staff had just retired and been replaced by a "McNamara

man," sixty-three-year-old General John P. McConnell, who, in auditions for the position with Lyndon Johnson, had assured the president that, unlike LeMay, he would go along to get along. His job, he told LBJ, would be to give the president "suitable alternatives." Johnson would "choose the one which best solves the problem *as you see it*." That said, McConnell began pressing inside the Pentagon for a massive air campaign against North Vietnam (with over 1,000 aircraft) that might as well have been designed by LeMay.[13]

Khanh's champagne had barely lost its fizz before he was removed by a coup in late February 1965—this latest one led by Air Marshal Ky and General Nguyen Van Thieu. It hadn't taken long for the once plucky Khanh to grasp the futility of the war. His efforts to expand conscription and military activity to defeat the Viet Cong had been shouted down in the streets by student- and Buddhist-led protests. The Buddhists and their many supporters had become stridently anti-American, attacking the United States Information Service (USIS) centers in Hue and Saigon, shouting "Taylor go home!," and deriding the Khanh junta as "American lackeys." The CIA warned that "social and political revolution" was under way. The whole scene, George Ball observed, had "the smell of death" about it.[14]

Khanh had briefly reinvented himself as "the Sihanouk of Vietnam," a nod to the neighboring leader of Cambodia, who was attempting to walk a neutral line between communists and anticommunists. That was enough to provoke the junta, now known as the Armed Forces Council, to move with Ambassador Taylor's encouragement against Khanh, who earlier had moved on the exact same pretext against Big Minh. By this point the VC controlled most of South Vietnam's territory and were hacking away at the government-controlled areas with near impunity. The South Vietnamese regional commanders were devoting their time to politics, not war, and it showed. ARVN casualties rose steeply, to 1,500 a week, and 350 ARVN soldiers were deserting the colors every day, putting the American advisers in their midst at greater risk. In a single week in mid-February, 36 Americans were killed, 196 wounded, and another dragged into the jungle never to be seen again.[15]

President Johnson, who had been led to believe by Mac Bundy that he could switch the war on and off and "shape" communist behavior with "graduated pressure," began finally to grasp that such an approach was a fallacy. General Westmoreland remarked on the "folly of running the minute details of a war by a committee of presidential advisers thousands of miles away" and now called for US forces "in division strength" to protect US personnel and facilities. Former president Eisenhower came to the White House for a three-hour meeting with Johnson on February 17, 1965. The thirty-fourth president had clearly shaken off his old misgivings about the mischief of the "military-industrial complex" and now breathed fire. The thirty-sixth president, Ike insisted, must prepare six to eight infantry divisions for immediate intervention in the war. "We cannot let the Indochinese peninsula go," the old general exhorted. That same day, LBJ's UN ambassador, Adlai Stevenson, argued against the "harder military line" sought by Westmoreland and Eisenhower, but confessed that he saw no viable path to peace. Beijing and Moscow would veto in the Security Council any American effort to stop infiltration or impose a cease-fire, and Hanoi was not negotiating.

Throughout his meeting with Eisenhower, Johnson displayed remarkable servility—more evidence of his lack of confidence on military matters. On February 20, the Joint Chiefs put meat on the bones of Ike's advice: they recommended sending 65,000 American troops and a half-dozen Air Force squadrons for counterinsurgency combat operations. There was no point in negotiating, the generals contended, because South Vietnam's position was too weak to extract *any* concessions from Hanoi.[16]

On February 25, General Khanh was bundled onto a Pan Am flight to Paris. Ambassador Taylor called for a "Victory Government" of new South Vietnamese personalities who would "set their sights on victory and vigorously pursue it." The CIA mocked Taylor's cheerleading, observing that Khanh's flight into exile with no clear successor "merely opens up new opportunities for numerous aspirants to the role of military strongman." General Nguyen Van Thieu, competing for that role with Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, was described in a CIA report as the perfect cat's-paw: "intelligent, highly ambitious," and entirely focused on "personal advancement."[17]

MACV noted that the rise of Thieu and Ky changed nothing: the "consummate interest in politics" that had gained them the junta leadership had entailed a neglect of the war effort and led to more monthly declines in ARVN operations and effectiveness. And none of the American air raids intended to stand in for the floundering ARVN did much damage. Their greatest impact was on the Soviets' attitude. Senator Fulbright warned the

president that escalation in Vietnam would "intensify the Cold War" and cause "a revival of jingoism," and it did. Kosygin was in Hanoi during Flaming Dart I and II, and he would return to Moscow determined to avenge the slight to Soviet pride and equip Hanoi with the latest air defenses.[18]

On March 2, 1965, Johnson ordered the start of Operation Rolling Thunder, an open-ended air campaign conceived by Johnson's inner circle as a "slow squeeze," what Mac Bundy called "a policy of *sustained* reprisal against North Vietnam." Instead of knocking the North Vietnamese out with massive air raids that might trigger Soviet and Chinese intervention or inflict a humanitarian disaster and harden North Vietnamese resolve, the United States would increase pressure on Hanoi delicately, adding or subtracting targets—barracks, depots, bridges—to "shape" North Vietnamese actions and opinion.

The aims of the air campaign were deliberately "soft": assist South Vietnam, avoid Soviet or Chinese intervention, and "allay" American domestic concerns about the bombing of North Vietnam. American pilots, LBJ boasted, "can't hit an outhouse without my permission." Any target that might cause Soviet or Chinese intervention or, as Mac Bundy put it, "make it hard for Hanoi to shift its ground" was scratched from the list, all but ensuring that the bombing would be ineffective.

Seventy percent of North Vietnam's imports arrived at Haiphong harbor and the other 30 percent came by rail over the Chinese border, but both areas were left unscathed, as Johnson and his advisers were fearful of what they called the "flash point"—the one provocation that might bring the Chinese into the war or make it impossible for Hanoi to negotiate without losing face. Bob McNamara made a virtue of this delicacy: "We are trying to induce them to get out of the war without having their country destroyed and to realize if they do not get out, their country will be destroyed."[19]

Rolling Thunder was hugely controversial—Johnson's caution about getting into another Korea weighed against military complaints (most cut off by McNamara or Wheeler before they reached his ears) that the air campaign was inadequate. But Johnson forbade a real strategic air offensive of the sort LeMay had pushed during the September 1964 Sigma II war game. He and McNamara agreed that airpower would be used to defeat the "insurrection" in the South as well as North Vietnamese attempts to feed that insurrection with infiltrators and supplies, but it would not be used "to overthrow the Communist government of North Vietnam" or destroy its capacity to wage war. To critics of this micromanagement, Johnson replied: "As long as I am Commander in Chief, I am going to control from Washington."[20]

Civilian hawks like McNamara, Bundy, and Rusk envisioned a measured air campaign as a cattle prod, to "touch up" North Vietnam and persuade them to cut ties with the VC and recognize South Vietnam. There would be no loss of face in failure, Mac Bundy assured the president on February 7, because people all over the world would see that "we did all that we could." He then told LBJ that he put the odds of South Vietnam surviving the war as an independent nation at about 25 percent. But bomb anyway, he advised, for "even if it fails, the value of the effort seems to exceed its cost." The war had not even begun in earnest, and it was already draped with an air of futility and defeatism.[21]

Instead of thousand-bomber raids over Hanoi, Westy sourly commented in his memoirs, we got "two to four raids a week by a few dozen planes at a time." Taking it all in, *New York Times* columnist Russell Baker observed on March 2, the day Rolling Thunder began: "It is almost impossible to find out what United States policy is in Vietnam, unless you are the kind of person who can get an all-night bull session with Dean Rusk or McGeorge Bundy." And even if you were such a person, he continued, "this is the most dangerous possible moment to be caught with an opinion about the policy." Most Americans, Baker concluded, "felt that while there probably was a United States policy on Vietnam, it would be hopeless for them to try to understand it in the limited lifetime available to them." He titled the column "Befuddled in Asia."[22]

MACV's monthly evaluations, known as MONEVALs, described a war in South Vietnam that was now hanging by the slender thread of US airpower. "USAF F-100s and B-57s doing all the work" was a well-worn phrase. After the coup of February 1965, operations by the ARVN's 300,000 troops all but stopped because of "the diversion of commanders' interest by political intrigues in Saigon," which, in turn, led to more "administrative confusion" all across the country as provincial budgets were frozen by the frequent changes of regime. Militia forces—the 300,000 villagers the Americans were arming to provide rural security in South Vietnam—were surrendering in droves and handing their weapons to the VC, in some cases

handing over their American advisers as well. The latest junta, McNamara warned, was already "on the brink of total collapse."[23]

Reading MONEVALs like these, which every month got worse, not better, Westmoreland concluded that the war would have to be Americanized. He knew that Hanoi would respond to a bigger American effort by infiltrating NVA divisions into South Vietnam and increasing aid to the VC, but he seems to have viewed this more as an opportunity than as a risk. He would destroy the VC's state sponsor in battle with the method enshrined in the Army's 1962 *Field Service Regulations*: use "United States military forces to terminate the conflict rapidly and decisively."[24]

Westy was itching for war, for the big promotion from adviser to field commander. He was so eager that when his military intelligence shop predicted in the spring of 1965 that American escalation would provoke the North Vietnamese to march tens of thousands of troops into South Vietnam to reinforce the Viet Cong, Westy "revised the number downward" before transmitting it to the White House. "Jesus," one of Westmoreland's aides said to another after reading the truthful estimate, "if we tell this to the people in Washington we'll be out of the war tomorrow." Harkins had prevaricated to keep the advisory mission going. Westmoreland was prevaricating to get combat operations going.[25]

Rolling Thunder required more jets and air bases, none of which—after the bloody attacks at Bien Hoa, Saigon, Pleiku, and Qui Nhon—could be safely entrusted to the ARVN. Westmoreland requested a 6,000-man Marine expeditionary brigade to defend the American facilities, which the president whittled down to 3,500 Marines, who were sent to guard the airfield at Da Nang on March 8, 1965. "I'm scared to death of putting ground forces in," LBJ told McNamara, "but I'm more frightened about losing a bunch of planes from lack of security." These 3,500 Marines—half had been circling in ships off the shore of Vietnam for more than a month, the other half flew in from Okinawa—were the first pebbles in a coming avalanche of American manpower.[26]

If LBJ had supposed that the Marines—a combined-arms force with their own tanks, artillery, and aircraft—would suffice to turn the tide in combat or even as a bargaining chip, he was quickly brought to his senses. Even a bare-bones program limited to guarding American bases would require troop numbers far in excess of what the Marines could provide. The Army reckoned that 15,000 troops would be needed to provide security for Pleiku, and a similar number for each of the sprawling American bases at Da Nang, Qui Nhon, Bien Hoa, Saigon, and Cam Ranh Bay. In all, Westy said, he'd need at least 75,000 troops just to safeguard US personnel and bases.[27]

LBJ pressed ahead, despite the total absence of strategy or even a reliable strategic partner. He never paused to consider the key flaw in his strategy. "Escalation dominance" was America's decisive advantage—its ability to raise the level of pain in North Vietnam to unbearable levels. But LBJ could not invade or devastate North Vietnam without risking war with China or the Soviet Union. The limited war he *could* wage against Hanoi would never push it to the brink. He flailed angrily, hoping to land a lucky punch. "You get things bubbling, General," he barked at the Army chief of staff in a White House elevator. But the president didn't specify what he meant. Johnson was feeling pressured to display a little more "go-north attitude," as he put it. He worried that Republicans would view him as a patsy, and he needed them to side with him, not with the southern Democrats, who were trying to kill the Great Society programs as zealously as they had tried to kill civil rights. "If I don't go in now," LBJ snapped, "and they show later I should have gone, then, they'll be all over me in Congress. They won't be talking about my civil rights bill, or education, or beautification. No sir, they'll push Vietnam up my ass every time. Vietnam. Vietnam. Vietnam. Right up my ass."[28]

Meeting with the Joint Chiefs in April 1965, LBJ sowed the seeds of what would shortly become the "search and destroy" strategy. He rejected Marine General Wally Greene's plea for an intensification of the war against North Vietnam, but he placed no limits on the war in South Vietnam: "We are limited to what we can do in North Vietnam, but we have almost free rein in South Vietnam, and I want to kill more Viet Cong." He officially authorized a change in posture from static defense to "counterinsurgency combat operations." In short, the US military was commanded to fight the war against North Vietnam in South Vietnam, where there would be few restrictions on the use of American force.[29]

Ordered by President Johnson to come up with answers and solutions—"win the game in South Vietnam" and "start killing more Viet Cong"—the Army got to work. Their 1963 field manual on "counter-guerrilla operations" called for restless "combat patrolling," "continuous

pressure," and "aggressive action" to destroy the insurgents. In March 1965, Westmoreland submitted his "Commander's Estimate of the Situation," which adverted the desirability of crossing into Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail but settled for high-intensity operations inside South Vietnam, which he called "free maneuver of American and Allied units throughout South Vietnam."[30]

It was a critical moment, spanning the spring and summer of 1965. Some in the administration wanted no more than seventeen battalions sent to Vietnam to secure the air bases critical to Rolling Thunder, with combat left to the South Vietnamese. If the South Vietnamese collapsed, the Americans could depart with a minimum of fuss.[31]

But Westmoreland and the chiefs thought that such a strategy was too passive, reactive, and indecisive. They wanted forty-four battalions, with at least twenty-four more in the pipeline, to take the fight to the communists and, as Westy put it, "stomp them to death." Westy shrewdly cloaked the request in the "signaling" language of the Johnson White House: forty-four maneuver battalions, he alleged, would "give us a substantial and hard-hitting capability on the ground *to convince the VC that they cannot win.*"[32]

Johnson edged closer to war on the ground. He authorized McNamara to begin using American ground troops to exert graduated pressure in the same way as air strikes—to "signal" stiffening American resolve. Air raids, LBJ told reporters in April, were "carefully limited," aimed at "concrete and steel, and not human life." He assured the American people in a speech that he knew of no "far-reaching strategy that is being suggested or promulgated for Vietnam," as if that were a *good* thing. Noting that the University of Michigan had just held the first "teach-in" of the war, a twelve-hour event in four auditoriums and six classrooms that drew 3,000 students wearing "Stop the War in Vietnam" buttons and vowing to organize marches and legislative action against the war, the president grumbled that Americans should show more respect for "our soldiers who are dying in Vietnam."[33]

LBJ unveiled plans to lavish foreign aid on South *and* North Vietnam if only Hanoi would agree to an "honorable peace." He would fund a Mekong River development program "on a scale to dwarf our [Tennessee Valley Authority]," and finance education and healthcare in both Vietnams as well. There was a pleading tone to it all, Johnson in speeches saying things like "I'll never be second" in the search for peace, and "I'll go anywhere at any time and meet with anyone" for peace in Vietnam. Le Duan and Ho Chi Minh, recognizing the president's desperation, rebuffed the offer immediately. Peace, the politburo announced, would come only after the United States stopped the bombing, withdrew from South Vietnam, and permitted a coalition government in Saigon that would finish the task of national unification. So long as the Americans and their "puppets" remained, the Viet Cong would serve as the legitimate representative of the South Vietnamese people.[34]

McNamara, meanwhile, flew to Hawaii to meet with Westmoreland and Taylor. In Honolulu on April 20, 1965, the die was cast. Bombing was not working, Westmoreland argued; the North had endured 2,800 sorties over ten weeks of bombing and would continue to endure whatever bombing the United States unleashed because Hanoi knew that it was close to winning the war in the South. Westmoreland outlined what he called his "victory strategy." He should be given more troops, Westmoreland said, to beat the NVA and the VC on the ground in the South, and prove to the communist leadership that they couldn't win. Only then, he argued, would Hanoi yield, or negotiate.

With McNamara, the Joint Chiefs, and the president leaning toward a major ground commitment, Westmoreland secured 30,000 more troops at the Honolulu meeting, raising the total number of US forces ticketed for South Vietnam to 82,500—a 150 percent increase. He wanted at least three divisions to defend the coastal plain against the VC and begin offensive operations in the Central Highlands against NVA infiltrators. Westy changed the American aim from merely signaling the futility of continued war—by bombing the North and installing US troops in a few invincible southern "enclaves"—to seeking and destroying the communist forces in the South with American maneuver battalions. The CIA director observed (again) that such a strategy would produce "no definite result" for the simple reason that North Vietnam could easily match and exceed every American surge with troops of its own.[35]

The stickiness of the liability created by Westmoreland's "victory strategy" was almost immediately felt. There were 50,000 US troops in South Vietnam on June 1, 1965, with 30,000 more on the way. Westy now requested 72,000 more, for a total of 152,000. The new CIA director, Admiral William

Raborn, proved no more supportive than McCone had been. Every month the ARVN was losing 10,000 troops to desertion, not combat. What was the point of reinforcing such an army with American boys? asked Raborn. He cautioned LBJ against the surge: "We will find ourselves pinned down," unable to get out, forced to "broaden the conflict in quantum jumps." The war, Raborn said, was more political than military and needed to be won "at the hamlet level" by the South Vietnamese. White House counsel Clark Clifford warned that the surge would lead LBJ into "a quagmire," an "open-end commitment without a realistic hope of ultimate victory." Clifford advised taking a settlement instead; "It won't be what we want, but we can learn to live with it."[36]

LBJ temporized, whittling Westy's latest request for 72,000 troops down to 18,000—"to hold the situation." The president would immediately send the nine battalions (16,000 troops) of the airmobile 1st Cavalry Division, better known as the "Cav." The president told Wheeler that he wanted "maximum protection at the least cost." The situation appeared hopeless: the North Vietnamese and VC "think they are winning," LBJ said, "and we think they are too." The war continued without any real strategic direction—its only apparent aim to burnish Johnson's national security credentials and postpone defeat by inserting American forces.[37]

Westy's request for forty-four battalions coincided with more coup attempts in Saigon, as the junta members, goaded by the VC double agent Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao, marched in and out of Saigon with loyal troops until the Americans and the junta agreed in June to formally anoint Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky prime minister and General Nguyen Van Thieu president. Ky was, among other things, a drug trafficker who used his command of the South Vietnamese air force to smuggle Laotian opium into Saigon on military flights. Ky told a British interviewer in 1965 that he had "only one hero: Hitler." The Johnson administration scrambled to deny the remark and accuse the interviewer of fabricating it, at which point Ky reaffirmed it. Hitler was indeed his man.[38]

Thieu too was a polarizing figure, an ambitious officer who had converted in his thirties from Buddhism to Catholicism to improve his career prospects. The first act of the two leaders was to decree a "no-breathing week," during which newspapers were shut down and civil liberties suspended. Predictably, the "no-breathing week" would extend into years as the most effective way to silence rising demands for reform. The more Washington asserted the need to support South Vietnamese democracy, the less their South Vietnamese protégés worked at it. The Thieu-Ky rivalry would shortly begin to gnaw at South Vietnam like a cancer, for these two men, who would become avatars for Saigon politics until the downfall of the regime ten years later, commanded rival factions that spread their corrosive influence into every corner of the South Vietnamese government and military.

The thirty-five-year-old Ky was a flamboyant hustler who dressed like his idea of an air ace, with purple scarf, flight suit, and Ray-Bans. To complete the look, he divorced his wife to marry a beautiful Air Vietnam flight attendant who often appeared in public at his side in matching flight suit, scarf, and sunglasses. General Khanh had fueled Ky's rise from obscurity, using Ky's control of the air force around Saigon to secure his own coup and fend off rivals. The forty-two-year-old Thieu, commander of the ARVN 5th Division, had been sidelined by Khanh, a snub that proved helpful after Khanh's ouster in 1965, when Thieu was made chairman of the new junta's National Leadership Council.

The competition of these two strivers for control of South Vietnam distracted from real nation-building. To secure their own positions, they pursued a spoils system for the next ten years, Ky trying to place his men in every powerful ministry, and Thieu doing the same. Every South Vietnamese military headquarters, police unit, and civilian ministry was gradually divided into opposing camps, one for Thieu, the other for Ky. The two leaders discovered that American-ordered "anti-corruption campaigns" could be helpful, not to cleanse South Vietnam of corruption but to purge each other's supporters. "Americans are big boys," Ky laughed. "You can talk them into almost anything. All you have to do is sit with them for half an hour over a bottle of whiskey and be a nice guy."[39]

None of these machinations could be concealed indefinitely from the American press and public. An antiwar mood was slowly spreading. Barry McGuire's "Eve of Destruction" surged to number one on the charts with its haunting lyrics: "The eastern world it is explodin' / Violence flarin', bullets loadin'." Twenty thousand demonstrators—reminded by McGuire's hit that they were "old enough to kill, but not for votin'"—gathered around the White House on April 17, 1965, demanding that "the U.S. get out of

Vietnam." Johnson zigged and zagged, proffering some (barely) positive war aims in early 1965—none of them compelling or concrete. Now he spoke wanly of redeeming a "national pledge," taking "the path of peaceful settlement," creating "confidence in the value of an American commitment," and dulling "the appetite of aggression."[40]

These were insipid aims for a president who had spent five years around this emerging war. Privately, Johnson beseeched his inner circle in June to tell him what the war was *really* about: "Who sees our purpose and means of achieving it out there?" he asked. "Will it be so costly? How do we expect to win?" In this meeting—with Mac Bundy, Rusk, McNamara, Ball, and McNaughton—Johnson fretted that he might lose reelection in 1968 to an Eisenhower-like candidate, who would make the whole election about terminating the no-win war. Ike had chased off Truman and beaten Adlai Stevenson this way in 1952, LBJ reminded the group. "How do you expect to wind things up? You'll get, 'I go to Korea,'" a reference to Eisenhower's pledge during the Korean War that, if elected, he would "go to Korea" and end the frustrating conflict.[41]

Reelection obsessed LBJ. He couldn't be on the ballot in 1968, the president exclaimed at another meeting, with "Ho Chi Minh running through the streets of Saigon." Republican Richard Nixon was already warning that Vietnam would be *the* major issue in the 1968 elections if Johnson failed "to win the war, and end it." Another likely challenger, Ronald Reagan, was calling for "full mobilization" and a blockade of Haiphong harbor, saying, "I don't see how a nation our size, engaged with a nation that size, can talk about a ten- or twenty-year war. We ought to go in and get it over with."[42]

In a meeting at Camp David on July 25, 1965, to brainstorm *how* to "get it over with," General Earle Wheeler proposed sending 750,000 US troops to defeat the VC insurgency once and for all. Johnson interrupted to say that such numbers would *never* be sent to Vietnam. Clark Clifford, who could see that Johnson was not facing facts, interrupted: "But even if it *is* the figure, and it *works*, my question is, what *then*?" Would the United States be free to depart, leaving South Vietnam to enjoy its freedom and independence? No, Wheeler replied. The United States would have to leave a large force in South Vietnam for twenty or thirty years to keep the peace.

There was something unhinged about the process: a president trying to wage a war by stealth and muddying every important detail, from the cost to the scope and length of the commitment; generals not insisting on clarity; and all of the in-group power players endorsing the travesty because they believed that, despite the flaws in planning and messaging, the war would be short and easy once the VC and NVA found themselves at the sharp end of American mobility and firepower. The fifty-eight-year-old Clifford looked around the room—at the generals, the cabinet officers, and the White House aides—and declared: "I see catastrophe ahead for my country."[43]

Three days later, LBJ finally handed Westmoreland a blank check—in a press conference: "Additional forces will be needed later, and they will be sent as requested," the president told reporters and the MACV commander. This was all the more astonishing because Johnson's rationale for the war, relayed at the same press conference, remained soggy: "We are there because for all our shortcomings, for all our failings as a nation and a people, we remain fixed on the pursuit of freedom as a deep and moral obligation that will not let us go." The president's expressed aims were even soggier, all about what Washington did *not* want: "We do not want an expanding struggle... but we will not surrender or retreat." "We will not abandon the men that are there." But what was the war *for*? Clearly there was little to recommend this war, but Johnson did not dare pull out.[44]

Mac Bundy had been transformed by his trip to Pleiku in February 1965 when he had seen American dead and wounded for the first time. LBJ was alarmed by the transformation, for Bundy had previously occupied a more thoughtful space between the doves and hawks: "Well, they made a believer out of you, didn't they," Johnson greeted Bundy on his return to Washington. Always cool and calculating, Bundy came back hot and emotional. The spilled American blood had to be avenged. The troops had to be protected. McGeorge Bundy at war, Johnson laughed to a friend, reminded him of the pious preacher's son who went to a whorehouse. When asked how he liked it, the boy said: "It's really good, I don't know what it is, but I like it, it's really good."[45]

The report Mac Bundy delivered to the president after his Vietnam trip was hugely influential. Without US action, the national security adviser warned, South Vietnam would collapse. Negotiated withdrawal was "surrender on the installment plan." The "international prestige and influence of the U.S.," Bundy said, were "directly at risk in Vietnam." And yet in the

same report Bundy confessed that the Viet Cong had "astonishing" perseverance and frightening ubiquity: "They can appear anywhere—and almost at any time." Against such a foe, there was no "shortcut to success."[46]

Bundy was aware of the mounting VC terror in South Vietnam: 400 government officials beheaded, disemboweled, or otherwise killed in 1965 alone, hundreds of South Vietnamese people murdered in VC mine and grenade attacks on buses, restaurants, airports, and stadiums, and VC raiders torturing villagers to extract information and obedience. The American people would have to prepare for a long struggle against such a ruthless enemy. Bundy's ultimate recommendation, in short, was fatuous on its face: limited boots on the ground and a lightweight air and naval reprisal policy. The United States would deploy intermittent bombing to avenge the murder of a hamlet chief or a terrorist bomb in a restaurant against the concerted decades-long struggle of Vietnamese revolutionaries.[47]

When McNamara presented Johnson with the "maximum-force options" pushed by the Joint Chiefs—70 maneuver battalions, 235,000 reserves, and more air wings—the SecDef had to admit that even if such colossal forces won on the battlefield, suffering a projected 500 killed-in-action every month and twice as many wounded, they would *solve* nothing. "It would merely drive the VC back into the trees and back to their 1960–64 pattern—a pattern against which U.S. troops and aircraft would be of limited value. Even in success," McNamara concluded, "it is not clear how we will be able to disengage our forces from Vietnam."[48]

Johnson opted to keep this emerging disaster as secret, cheap, and low-key as possible. The chiefs wanted $12.7 billion for the new deployments, 27 additional maneuver battalions and a call-up of 235,000 reserve troops. Johnson replied with a no—not a penny more than the $1 billion already budgeted. And no reserves. LBJ had been vice president when JFK called up 150,000 reservists during the Berlin crisis of 1961, an event most notable for its political toxicity.[49]

They had to lower "the political noise level of escalation," Johnson told his advisers. Raising taxes, asking for a $12 billion war supplemental, declaring a "national emergency," and calling up 235,000 reserves to fill out the forces bound for Vietnam would be the opposite of low-key. It would disturb every community in America and would give congressional conservatives a pretext to choose guns over the butter of the president's Great Society programs, which he hoped to see passed into law by January 1966. After *that*, he assured the chiefs, moving the goalposts yet again, he would get them more money for the war. As Johnson later put it to Doris Kearns Goodwin: "If I left the woman I really loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose *everything* at home."[50]

The result? Strategic chaos, or, as Mac Bundy put it, "a premium put on imprecision." The war would be fought, General Harold Johnson said, with "peacetime practices." The quality of the Army would "erode" without proper funding and reserve capabilities, he warned. The reserves were key. The United States had 1 million trained reserve troops in 1965. They were kept on the payroll for a reason: to bridge the gap between peacetime active-duty forces and the expanded manpower demands of a war such as this. By not calling up the reserves, LBJ commenced the degradation of the armed forces. Without enough trained troops, the services would have to deplete America's strategic reserve—the uncommitted active-duty forces in the United States—and then rely entirely on draftees and troops plucked from other overseas commands, where they were needed at least as much as in Vietnam.

But these concerns were bulldozed by LBJ's determination to keep the war cheap and hidden. In an NSC meeting on July 27, 1965, where the decision was taken to expand the war without properly budgeting or even declaring it, Johnson explained his casuistry: "I don't want to be overly dramatic and cause tensions. I think we can get our people to support us without having to be too provocative and warlike." The next day he announced to the American public that the US troop level in Vietnam would be raised from 75,000 to 125,000 "almost immediately," and then to 200,000, but that this provision of thirty-four more maneuver battalions plus 35,000 combat support troops and essential air squadrons would be accomplished by doubling monthly draft calls, from 17,000 to 35,000. The reserves would not be called up.[51]

LBJ's "credibility gap" was widening. The president was determined to cloud the war in mystery, so that its true cost in blood and dollars would not reveal itself. The more specific he was about ends and means, the easier it would be for Congress or the media to price the unfolding war. He had recently assured the public that the war would cost no more than $2 billion

LBJ and Clark Clifford listen to Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. during the pivotal July 27, 1965, National Security Council meeting. There the decision was taken to expand the war without declaring or even budgeting it. (LBJ Library)

a year, but legislators on Capitol Hill, after pricing the commitments made to Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs, put the real cost at closer to five times that—$10 billion a year, a sum that was certain to increase. But how could the United States finance new programs such as Medicare and Medicaid in addition to a hot war in Southeast Asia without also raising taxes to pay for it all and stifle the inevitable inflation?

It couldn't. US inflation would double in the next two years, and then double again by 1970. The federal deficit would balloon to $10 billion by 1967, $27 billion by 1968. But Johnson didn't dare raise taxes to deal with the inflation and deficits. If he did, he complained, the powerful Democratic chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee would cut him off: "Old Wilbur Mills will thank me kindly and send me back my Great Society, and then he'll tell me that they'll be glad to spend whatever we need for the war."[52]

McNamara in 1965 solved this particular problem by hiding the true cost of the war. The total cost, from beginning to end, he assured Congress, would not exceed $10 billion, a trifling share of GDP. It was a fantasy

number, plucked from the air and based on the assumption that the war and all spending associated with it would conveniently terminate on June 30, 1967, the end of a fiscal year. Privately, McNamara knew that the cost would be far higher, at least $21 billion, and probably much more than that. Horace Busby, a White House aide who sat in on many of these discussions, scribbled an urgent warning to LBJ in July 1965: "What we are considering is not whether we continue a war—but whether we start (or have started) a *new* war. The 1954–64 premises, principles, and pretexts no longer apply. This is no longer South Vietnam's war. We are no longer advisers. The stakes are no longer South Vietnam's. The war is *ours*. We are participants. The stakes are ours—and the West's."[53]

Chapter 4

STRENGTH ONLY FOR DEFEAT

On July 28, 1965, having wrestled his advisers into agreement on the troop surge for Vietnam, Johnson began revealing the true scope of the war to the American people. Some of his aides had wanted the president to deliver a major speech to the nation, announcing the expanded American commitment in Vietnam. Daniel Ellsberg, the analyst who would later leak the Pentagon Papers, actually drafted such a speech for LBJ. It challenged Americans to rise to the occasion and battle international communism "till hell freezes over."[1]

Johnson froze in horror. That was asking far too much of a nation that had just reelected him to keep the peace and was already on the hook for the Great Society. Instead, LBJ declared the Vietnam War quietly, at a press conference. "Why must young Americans, born into a land exultant with hope and with golden promise, toil and suffer and sometimes die in such a remote and distant place?" he asked. "We did not choose to be the guardians at the gate," he answered, "but there is no one else." America *must* fight "against the grasping ambition of Asian communism." The president would send 125,000 troops immediately and double the monthly draft call, to 35,000—not to win, but to coax Hanoi into negotiations. "We are going to continue to persist, if persist we must, until death

and desolation have led to the same conference table where others could now join us at a much smaller cost."[2]

Later, Johnson cleaned it up. No mother wanted her son to die for *negotiations*, and for a rich superpower with 200 million citizens to fight a poor third-world country of 20 million for the prize of a "conference table" sounded pathetic. Privately Johnson told worried congressional leaders that the aim really *was* negotiations—that he could get Hanoi to quit in six months' time—but publicly he spoke of victory, as did the Joint Chiefs. McGeorge Bundy summarized LBJ's perplexity: "He had decided to do whatever he had to do, but he had not decided how much he had to do."[3]

In the Pentagon, where McNamara had struggled to assemble the manpower for the more limited mission—to force Hanoi to the conference table—there was a clear realization that Johnson's call for victory had landed the US military in what McNamara aide John McNaughton called "the dilemma." America, McNaughton wrote McNamara in mid-January 1966, could force Hanoi to negotiate only if it deployed the force necessary for victory. Yet North Vietnam was a young developing country with a galloping birth rate, and 120,000 North Vietnamese males reached draft age every year. Additionally, there were more than a million North Vietnamese men of military age not yet serving in the NVA. That number could be more than doubled by making more North Vietnamese age cohorts draft eligible. Hanoi had only to send a fraction of all these young people south to counter every American troop surge and replace casualties.[4]

This was McNaughton's "dilemma" in a nutshell: "the force necessary for victory" in South Vietnam was going to keep rising—to unthinkable heights. With large numbers of NVA reinforcing the VC in the South, Westmoreland and the chiefs, who had seemed content with 400,000 American troops, now estimated that 750,000 American troops would be needed for victory. But that was two-thirds of the entire active-duty strength of the US Army and Marine Corps. President Johnson would never authorize that many troops for a limited war in a faraway country, McNaughton noted, yet smaller troop numbers wouldn't get the job done, and would be interpreted by the enemy as an admission of weakness, emboldening Hanoi to prolong the war and wait America out. "If we go for compromise," McNaughton warned, "we have the strength only for defeat."[5]

STRENGTH ONLY FOR DEFEAT

To assemble more than "the strength for defeat," President Johnson sought help from America's allies, but he found few that were willing. The NATO countries met his requests for "more flags" in the coalition with a deafening silence. McGeorge Bundy and McNamara went so far as to offer the British $1 billion in aid if they would agree to send a brigade to Vietnam. Harold Wilson refused the offer, put off by the explanation that LBJ "wanted a few British soldiers to die in Vietnam alongside Americans" to give the appearance of a coalition. Only regional allies Australia and South Korea sent troops, the Australians averaging about 6,000 men in-country in any given year, the South Koreans 47,000. It wasn't much. Johnson would have to find most of his "free-world forces" in the United States.[6]

But the drafted "Vietnam-only Army"—shorn of its trained reserves—would be a two-edged sword. Taking young men was easier than pulling older men out of their civilian jobs, but it would become politically explosive as the war lengthened and the small draft calls of the late fifties and early sixties abruptly soared. Already in August 1965, Johnson was forced to extend the draft law to previously exempted married men to fill up the first deployments to Vietnam. Big draft calls would also pose political and morale problems because of the way they placed the burden of the war on a relatively small and disadvantaged cohort.

The Vietnam draft, based on the Selective Service Act of 1948, was anything but fair. Young men's draft status was decided by local draft boards, which were largely white—entirely white in many southern states—and tended to "defer" or exempt white middle-class youth, drafting working-class and minority men instead. African Americans, just 11 percent of the US population during the war, would furnish 16 percent of draftees and 23 percent of combat troops.[7]

Overall, of the 27.5 million American males eligible for the draft during the war, only 1.7 million would be drafted and sent to Vietnam. The rest either would not be called at all or would find sanctuary in illness (real or feigned), family hardship, the clergy, missionary work, college, graduate school, or other pursuits deemed exemptible. That this tendency to shift the burden of combat down the social scale was a deliberate piece of Cold War policy—to conserve America's intellectual capital in the event of war—did not lessen its perceived unfairness.[8]

While LBJ began deploying ground troops to Vietnam, the jungle paths through Laos and Cambodia to South Vietnam—collectively named the Ho Chi Minh Trail—hummed with activity. Regiments of 2,000 newly trained North Vietnamese conscripts were moving quietly down the forested tracks in groups of 200. They would change their unit numbers—critical for estimates of enemy strength and intentions—to confuse American and South Vietnamese intelligence. So, for example, as McNaughton did his thought exercise on what force level it would take to get North Vietnam to negotiate, Hanoi's NVA 33rd Regiment reported for training at the headquarters of the NVA 325B Division, renamed itself the NVA 101st Regiment, and took the cover name Song Lam (Blue River) for its march south to Cambodia in July and its infiltration into South Vietnam through the cut of the Ia Drang Valley. This meant that even before the 2,000-man unit infiltrated, it had begun to sow doubt in the minds of American and South Vietnamese military intelligence. Were they one regiment or three? If one, where were the other two? Such vagueness, compounded by the rare North Vietnamese deserter or prisoner, who might give one of three different unit designations, would make an attrition strategy hard to calibrate. If you never knew the enemy strength, you could never know what percentage of them you were killing.[9]

The man in charge of defending South Vietnam against these southbound NVA regiments was fifty-two-year-old General William Westmoreland, the straitlaced organization man chosen by Max Taylor to energize MACV. The shift from advising to fighting was converting Westy into a public figure. He would be named *Time* magazine's "Man of the Year" in January 1966—"a jut-jawed, flat-bellied six-footer, the sinewy personification of the American fighting man." Having already secured President Johnson's assent to give him 200,000 troops in 1965, 300,000 by 1966, and a blank check for the future, Westmoreland considered that he finally had the means to push the NVA and Viet Cong over what his operations chief called their "threshold of pain." Kill and maim enough of the enemy, General Bill DePuy asserted, and they would give up.[10]

"Stay loose," Westy jauntily wrote all of his Vietnam-bound division commanders. Major combat operations were imminent. French operations against the Viet Minh had been feeble by comparison. Westmoreland would dip into America's towering cash pile to fight the kind of war that no other power in the 1960s could even contemplate. With the United States generating 40 percent of world GDP in 1965, there seemed no limit to what America could do—in Vietnam or anywhere else.

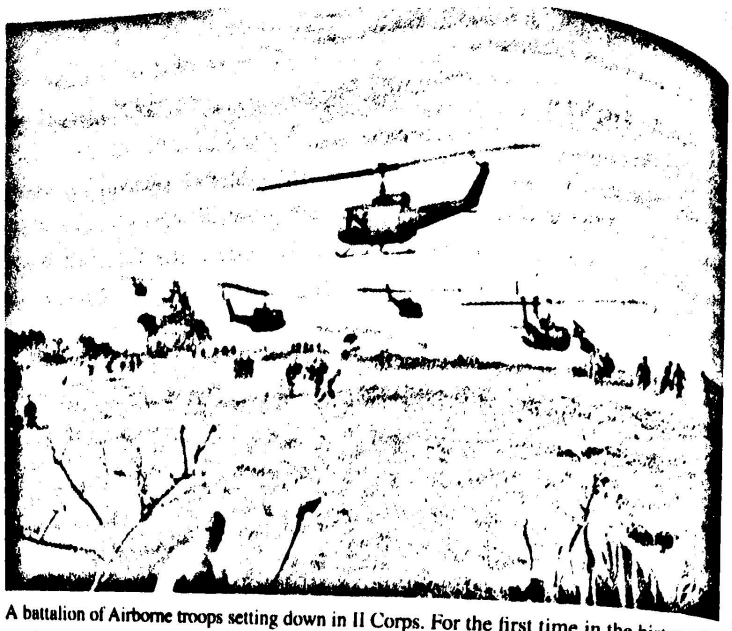
South Vietnam was immediately transformed by an American construction boom. The French had made do with just six air bases in Vietnam. America added forty-three new ones, including Bien Hoa, which during the Vietnam War became the busiest airport in the world. American construction companies built eleven new ports and naval bases, and hundreds of miles of road to connect South Vietnam's coastal cities with over a hundred new "agricultural settlements," which were really Special Forces camps sited on the high plateaus overlooking South Vietnam's long borders with Laos and Cambodia.

When the first Marines splashed ashore at Da Nang in 1965, there was no logistical system to support them. Everything had to come "over the beach." Two years later, there would be enough ports, airfields, and storage facilities to handle more than a million tons of supplies every month—enough to sustain a million troops in the field.[11]

When they found the elusive enemy, the Americans planned to destroy him with superior tactics and technology, which they gave a name: airmobile operations. For the first time in the history of warfare, a large field army would rely on a fleet of thousands of helicopters as its primary method of tactical movement. America's decision to fight in Vietnam coincided with the introduction into combat of the icon of the war: Bell's UH-1 Iroquois "utility helicopter," better known as the "Huey." The UH-1s began rolling off production lines in 1963. They could be configured as an air ambulance (known as a "medevac") with nine litters, as a gunship ("guns") with pilot-fired machine guns, rockets, and grenade launchers, or as a troop carrier ("slick") with space for a dozen soldiers and crew.

This streamlined, powerful marvel replaced the gawky Korea-era helicopters, whose 5,000-pound, thirteen-cylinder radial engines had eaten up most of the cargo space. When troops were crowded into what little space remained, those early helicopters couldn't even hover. They were too heavy. That's why they had four wheels—they had to make running takeoffs.

With its 500-pound gas-turbine engine and forty-eight-foot main rotors, the Huey changed the game. Even with two pilots, a crew chief, a door gunner, and six soldiers with full gear aboard, the Huey could hover



A battalion of Airborne troops setting down in II Corps. For the first time in the history of warfare, a large field army would rely on a fleet of thousands of helicopters as its primary method of tactical movement. (National Archives)

up to an altitude of 10,000 feet, fly 315 miles out and back, slip in and out of crude landing zones (LZs) on their skids, and whiz through the air at 125 mph, significantly faster than the 80 or 90 mph managed by its predecessor. And that was just version 1.0: the UH-1A and UH-1B models in use when the first American ground troops went to Vietnam in 1965. Version 2.0 was the UH-1H model, introduced in 1967–1968. The "Hotel" added 500 horsepower to the engine and stretched the fuselage to create 12 percent more space for men and supplies.

The Pentagon, the Joint Chiefs, and Westy all imagined that "search and destroy" operations with the Huey would be the decisive advantage in the war. The road-bound French had been continually ambushed, evaded, or wrong-footed. The airmobile Americans would be able to rush fresh troops to even the remotest battlefields. The helicopters, or "birds," erased the problems of time and space.[12]

The US Army had tested this "vertical envelopment" concept at Fort Benning, Georgia, in the early 1960s and then created the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) in 1965. The Cav would be by far the best-equipped outfit in Vietnam, and the idealized model for everything that followed. Their single "air-assault division" of 16,000 men in three brigades had 434 helicopters of its own to move assault troops in and out of LZs and resupply them during battle.

Four hundred and thirty-four helicopters were a lot: four or five times as many birds as were attached to a normal Army division in Vietnam. The helicopters were grouped in battalions, each usually consisting of three companies of troop ships ("slicks") and one company of gunships. The companies, in turn, were further subdivided into lift and gun platoons. For probes and reconnaissance missions, there were squadrons of air cavalry troops, which were equivalent in number to battalions and companies, respectively. These air cavalry squadrons contained fewer slicks, more guns, and eight or nine light observation helicopters (known as "loaches"), which darted above the jungle canopy searching for the enemy.

Each of the Cav's nine infantry battalions would have sixty-four helicopters dedicated to it alone during combat operations. The complexity and cost of moving, supplying, reinforcing, and coordinating operations with different types of helicopters—assault, assault support, and rocket-firing gunships—was so immense that British defense analysts judged the looming campaign in Vietnam "uniquely American." There would be seventy 30-ship assault helicopter companies and twenty 27-ship air cavalry squadrons operating at any given time in South Vietnam. And that sum did not include the many Hueys assigned to medevac detachments or command functions. Nor did it take account of companies of CH-47 Chinooks and CH-54 Skycranes for medium and heavy lift. No other great power could even envision spending like this on a limited war in a peripheral theater.[13]

Airmobile warfare was also uniquely American in its total emphasis on battle, with little strategic regard for the day after. Westmoreland always twinned his battle plans with calls for pacification—"an imaginative and aggressive civic-action program"—but securing the South Vietnamese population against VC penetration was never his priority, as we will see. It was a half-hearted sop to critics of search and destroy, and little more than that.

Westy's troops would be rapidly inserted and just as rapidly withdrawn. In theory, they would hopscotch between battles, gradually defeating the enemy, who would be mauled by "vertical envelopments" wherever

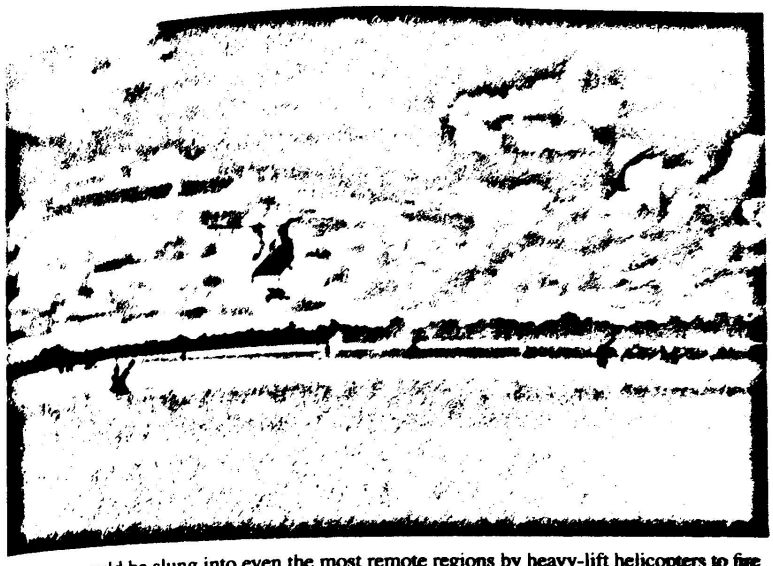
he appeared. In reality, the enemy would quickly grasp the strengths and weaknesses of this light-footed approach and learn to either avoid the Americans or wait them out. "Search and destroy" did not translate into "clear and hold." Noisy tactical victories here and there never produced "pacification"—the lasting defeat of insurgents and the restoration of government control. This would be the whole frustrating story of the war.[14]

Initially, however, such doubts did not cloud the high hopes of McNamara and Westmoreland. Flying in helicopters, US troops would, as their commanders put it, "move aggressively to contact with the enemy." They would use their mobility to trap and destroy North Vietnamese infiltrators and Viet Cong units, along with their essential caches of arms and food.[15]

Artillery would be the queen of this battlefield because it could be physically located just about anywhere and instantly activated in all weather, including monsoon rains, which drenched South Vietnam's regions at different times of the year, pouring down on Saigon and the Delta from April to September, soaking the central region from September to December, and washing across the northern provinces between October and April.

In a feat of engineering (and expenditure), the US Army and Marines began in 1965 to pre-position batteries of medium field artillery around South Vietnam in networked "fire support bases," which were simply called "firebases" or FSBs. These triangular or star-shaped artillery positions—whose outlines and asphalt helipads survive to this day on hilltops all over southern Vietnam—contained four- and six-gun batteries of 155 mm and 105 mm artillery.

These howitzers could be slung into even the most remote and trackless regions by twin-engine heavy-lift helicopters and would fire in support of any ground operation within their fifteen-mile effective range or against enemy attempts to overrun neighboring firebases. When infantry contact with the enemy was reported from the ground or the air, the gun crews in the firebase took those coordinates, determined range, angle, and fuse settings for their howitzers, and then opened fire. The infantry in the field were just bait, a "tethered goat" to lure communist troops into battle. The real killing would be done by the gunners in the firebases. "Theirs was an odd war," a visitor remarked. "A hundred shirtless men worked, sweating, in practiced synchronization in the hot, stagnant air....



Howitzers could be slung into even the most remote regions by heavy-lift helicopters to fire in support of any ground operation within their fifteen-mile effective range. Here a Chinook lowers a 105 mm howitzer into a 1st Infantry Division firebase in July 1966. (National Archives)

Working feverishly in tree-walled clearings dotted here and there, away from everyone else, their enemy remained unseen, and the measure of their success or failure was a radio call from an aerial observer counting bodies."[16]

The firebases, which could double as headquarters and helipads for units in the field, were, in turn, supplied by a web of American-built ammunition supply points. The supply system of "ammo humpers" around Saigon for the III and IV Corps areas became the model for all others. A 120,000-ton ammunition supply depot was built at Long Binh Post—a US Army base so large that it had its own city bus service, garbage collection, golf course, and water treatment plant. Twelve hundred trucks connected Long Binh's ammo dump to six regional ammunition supply points and three gunship rearming points. The overall concept was summed up by the commander of the US 4th Infantry Division: "If we are going to beat the enemy in the jungle we must take full advantage of our supporting firepower and avoid man-to-man engagements with small arms. This requires artillery in massive volumes."[17]

An American platoon or squad leader, surprised by an enemy ambush, had only to glance at his 1:25,000 map—gridded in squares, streams picked out in blue, hamlets in red, connected by white roads flanked with buff-colored huts beside green paddy fields. Assuming that he knew where he was—not always a safe assumption with inexperienced leaders in rugged wilderness—he would radio the enemy's grid coordinates to a forward air controller (FAC) or, if the monsoon was raging and ceilings were low, to the nearest firebase, which usually had a helpful sign like this one over its main gate: "You Yell + We Shell—Like Hell. Open 24 Hours Daily."[18]

American infantry in Vietnam also enjoyed the protection of *flying* artillery, first the Huey gunship model, known as the "Firebird," and then, from 1967, Bell Helicopter's Cobra gunships. The "Snakes," as the Cobras were known, were killing machines. Whereas the Huey gunships were armed versions of the slick, the Cobra would be the first helicopter designed as a "rotorcraft gunship." It had tandem seating like a strike fighter, with the gunner and pilot seated one behind the other, both with clear views of the airspace and battlefield. Whereas Huey Firebirds looked like the ad hoc contraptions they were, mini guns and rockets bolted to the airframe and skids, the Cobras mounted missiles and rocket pods on four hard points on its stub wings and carried a six-barrel mini gun in its nose that spat 100 rounds per *second*.

Each of the Cobra's 2.75-inch rockets had the destructive impact of a 105 mm shell. The Snake was a marvel, arriving on station in half the time of a Huey gunship, with twice the ammo and three times the loiter time. The gunships always escorted the "slicks" or troop carriers into a landing zone. They could "prep" the LZ with machine gun, cannon, and rocket fire to suppress any defenses, or circle around to block the retreat of enemy forces, buying time for ground troops to catch up and surround them.

The gunship cannons could fire four hundred 40 mm rounds a minute. The machine guns, known as flex or mini guns, were six-barreled electrically operated Gatling guns that spewed 6,000 rounds a minute, enough fire to plow up a football field from end zone to end zone in three seconds. If troops on the ground were attacked, they would "pop smoke" to mark their position. The gunships, organized in twelve-ship companies with roguish names like "Stacked Deck," "Smiling Tigers," or "Wolf Pack," would immediately "go hot"—running in to strafe the ground around the embattled troops. "Death is our Business and Business is Good" was the motto of a typical gunship company.[19]

Casualties, bound to be a sensitive issue in the United States, stood a better chance of survival in this war than in any previous war, thanks to the use of helicopters as ambulances. These ships, reconfigured with space for stretchers, were called "medevacs" or "dust-offs." They allowed for the fast pickup of casualties in the field and their delivery to a forward clearing station or, in severe cases, to one of the 8,000 hospital beds located around South Vietnam by American taxpayers. Casualty evacuation in Vietnam averaged fifteen minutes—"stand by for three U.S. litters, multiple frags," a pilot would radio—less time than it would take to summon an ambulance at home in the United States. Fast dust-offs meant that only 1.5 percent of American wounded were dying in Vietnam in 1966, compared with 2.5 percent in Korea and 4.5 percent in World War II.[20]

Tactical air support—called "tac air" in the field—was another vital component of airmobile operations. It gave infantry commanders access to "on-call" fighter bombers such as the F-100 Super Sabre or the F-4C Phantom, as well as fixed-wing gunships, which were C-47 and C-130 transport aircraft fitted with three mini guns firing 14,000 rounds of .30-caliber rifle ammo a minute. Like the Cobras, they could rake a football field from end to end with a three-second burst. Nicknamed "Spooky" or "Puff the Magic Dragon," the fixed-wing gunships were never more than thirty minutes away in Vietnam. They could fly in at 2,500 feet strewing flares to turn night into day and machine-gunning any enemy caught in the open. They flew higher during daylight missions, but they were no less lethal when equipped with the "Hand of God"—the Gatling-style Vulcan rotary cannon that fired 6,000 rounds of 20 mm ammunition a minute. The Spookies could fire uninterrupted for an hour or more, pummeling the ground below them until nothing was left standing or alive.

To position tac air where it was most needed, the US government built fifty more airfields around South Vietnam in the 1960s, for a total of one hundred. Twenty of them could be used for jet aircraft. The rest could land cargo planes such as the C-130 Hercules, which became a mainstay of the war effort, moving reinforcements, supplies, ammo, and casualties. By 1966, every tactically important area in South Vietnam was within twenty miles of an airfield. During infantry operations, the strike fighters orbited

the combat zone around the clock and could be directed against enemy attacks or withdrawals at supersonic speed.

A jet crew, streaking along at 500 miles per hour, made no decisions about targets. How could they? They were moving so fast that they never saw what they were bombing. In this pre-GPS, pre-smart-bomb era, they relied on FACs, who circled the battlespace in little Cessna prop planes—called "bird dogs"—and spoke by radio with the troops on the ground. There were 700 FACs operating out of seventy forward locations in South Vietnam by 1968. Either they would tell the aircrew what to bomb and provide the map coordinates, or the FAC would see and mark the enemy himself with a smoke rocket. It was a dangerous job in such a slow, unarmored plane. One of every twenty FACs was killed in action during the war.[21]

If even more firepower was needed, the Air Force repurposed its B-52 Stratofortress strategic bombers to drop conventional bombs on targets in South Vietnam. This was Operation Arc Light, which spanned the entire war. These strikes, by the big swept-wing bombers designed to deliver thermonuclear bombs against the Soviet Union, were especially devastating because they plastered a small area with concentrated fire. Really concentrated: with more than a hundred 500- and 750-pound bombs loaded in its belly and wings, each B-52 carried the bomb payload of four B-29 Superfortresses. In the first Arc Light strike flown in Vietnam, in June 1965, 30 B-52s dropped 558 tons of bombs onto a jungle area near Saigon that was just one mile long and two miles wide. Flying from Guam or Thailand, B-52s could literally vaporize any enemy unit unfortunate enough to be caught aboveground when the "Buffs" flew silently overhead at an altitude of 30,000 feet.[22]

Already in 1965, American aircraft were dropping more bombs on North and South Vietnam every *day* than the French had dropped during the entire fifty-six-day Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The American love affair with airpower was on. It allowed statesmen and citizens to wage war without guilt. From a safe distance, John Saar wrote in *Life*, "our air power seemed as innocuous and reliable as home electricity."[23]

A massive fuel network like the ammunition network was built from scratch to keep all of these aircraft in action. In III and IV Corps, the Army's Support Command built a vast petroleum, oils, and lubricants (POL) terminal at Long Binh Post. With pipelines, boats, barges, trains, and a fleet of 5,000-gallon tanker trucks, it fed the big air bases such as Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa as well as myriad smaller airfields and helipads. To keep the fuel flowing, US construction firms built seven deep-draft ports, storage for 3 billion barrels of oil, 600 miles of roads, and five miles of bridges. Until the summer of 1965, Long Binh had been a jungle of rainforest and rubber trees. The Americans then cleared 19,000 acres and constructed the biggest military base in Southeast Asia, with twenty-eight miles of perimeter, thousands of buildings, and 10 million square feet of barracks, warehouses, and maintenance shops.

Long Binh alone delivered 45 million gallons of fuel every month to its air bases and units in the field. Da Nang's POL terminal delivered similar quantities across I and II Corps. Augmented by this apparently limitless airpower, search and destroy was considered invincible. It would, one American officer insisted, "convince the enemy that he cannot hide, cannot hold the initiative, and cannot win."[24]

Westmoreland would have more of everything, and his forces would use the weapons in concert, as was intended, rather than singly, as the ARVN usually did, halting the infantry and air columns whenever the artillery started up. Every American operation would be finessed behind the scenes by liaison officers from the artillery and air squadrons, who—in theory—would always clear targets on the ground for fire that would be safe for all but the enemy. Westy crunched the numbers and concluded that if he could kill 8,000 communists every month, he would annihilate the VC and overwhelm North Vietnam's ability to reinforce the insurgency.[25]

In Washington, Bill Bundy in the State Department was already cautioning Westmoreland *not* to fight this enormously complex high-tech war independently with his US combat divisions. It would remove all incentives for the less well-equipped and less well-trained ARVN to fight or even improve, and "turn the conflict into a white man's war with the U.S. in the shoes of the French." If the ARVN was squeezed out in this way, Bill Bundy warned, the United States would be left holding the bag. Already the smart set in Saigon were using the phrase "*xai tien nhieu my*"—"to spend like Americans"—to describe not only the lifestyle of Americans in South Vietnam but also their extravagant use of artillery and airpower to secure even minor objectives.[26]

Until 1965, American diplomats and military advisers had struggled to put together anticommunist operations with balky South Vietnamese governments and troop commanders. As more and more Americans entered the country, entire operations could be planned and launched without the participation of a single Vietnamese. General Ed Lansdale, who had been pushed into retirement in 1963 for opposing just this sort of high-intensity war, considered Westy's airmobile divisions and all of their firepower a perversion of sound counterinsurgency doctrine that did *nothing* to secure "hearts and minds." Bernard Fall, the French historian and war correspondent who had written some of the best books on France's war in Indochina before turning to cover America's, was even more critical: "If tomorrow morning Mickey Mouse became prime minister of South Vietnam," Fall observed, "it would have precious little influence on the men of the U.S. Army...or on the fighting ability of the 3rd U.S. Marine Division." They would continue to pursue their strategy of "success through firepower," terrifying the people they were supposed to protect, widening the gap between themselves and the ARVN, and creating a crisis of confidence in Saigon.[27]

In the short run, Fall surmised, this American war was "militarily unlosable" because of the influx of US combat divisions and firepower, but in the long run? Casting his eyes back to the French experience, Fall felt certain that Hanoi would simply revert to guerrilla warfare and dodge Westmoreland's heaviest punches. In the meantime, all that could be predicted with any certainty was that a "prostrate South Vietnam, still in the hands of a politically irrelevant regime, would be plowed under by bombers and artillery." This was not a recipe for American success.[28]

Bernard Fall plunged deeper into this problem of American spending and overkill. He published a piece in the *New Republic* in October 1965 titled "Vietnam Blitz: A Report on the Impersonal War." Successful counterinsurgencies, Fall argued, had above all to be "personal"—they had to connect vulnerable civilians with their government and armed forces. When powerful allies like the United States were involved, they too had to get personal with the threatened populace, earning their loyalty and trust.

It was less about money and munitions and more about security and good governance. This failure to connect had doomed the French, and was now dooming the Americans. Technology and systems developed to protect

American troops would cost them the support of the Vietnamese people, who would be regular victims of "collateral damage" from bombs, shells, and napalm.

Touring South Vietnam in 1965, Fall was struck by the degree to which America's "Blitz" into Vietnam had already shouldered the Vietnamese out of the war, and not just the South Vietnamese allies but the North Vietnamese and the VC too. "There are no 'Wanted' posters in Vietnam offering rewards for the capture of a Communist leader," Fall marveled. The Americans showed no serious interest in the guerrilla war. They planned to destroy the enemy with big-unit operations. "For all one cares," Fall quipped, "the chairman of the [Viet Cong] could work as a cleanup boy in a U.S. mess hall in Bien Hoa, and nobody would recognize him."

Fall spoke to one American officer who told him that in the province he operated in, the Americans typically fired half a million dollars' worth of howitzer ammunition per month at unobserved targets while spending only $300 on information and intelligence gathering. Fall warned that this "progressive irrelevance of the human aspects of the Vietnam war," this "crass and constant" willingness to bombard civilian areas in the hope of hitting the shadowy VC, would undermine the war effort and demoralize the US forces.[29]

For now, Westmoreland treated cavils like these as the maundering of liberal critics. He confidently placed search and destroy at the core of a three-phase approach that he called a strategy. In Phase I, from mid-1965 to mid-1966, he would build US strength up to 400,000 troops and 500 aircraft, construct a vast logistical base, expand and "revitalize" the ARVN, and hold the line against the encroaching NVA and VC. In Phase II, from mid-1966 until late 1967, Westy would launch search and destroy operations in the border areas to defeat the infiltrating NVA main-force units. In the populated interior of South Vietnam, ARVN and US forces would launch "clearing" operations to kill or capture Viet Cong and secure the countryside. The goal was to "attrite VC and North Vietnamese forces at a rate higher than their capability to put men in the field," effectively knocking them out of the war. And yet the longer Westy delayed in the vital job of "pacification," weeding out the local insurgents and their communist commissars, the harder it would be to reach Phase III, when the war would be handed over to a more experienced and confident ARVN.[30]

The Viet Cong had agents everywhere, from peasants in hamlets to senior officials in Saigon. Here a US Marine takes VC suspects to a collection point in October 1965. (National Archives)

The VC were already embedded in most of the country, with functioning chapters of the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP) in every province. Most villages were controlled by thirty-five-man platoons of local guerrillas, who managed the flow of intelligence, manpower, transport, ammo, and food to main-force units, and resorted to harassment, sabotage, and assassination to remove government officials and enact their own tax gathering and propaganda.

It was the local guerrillas who provided the VC and NVA main-force units with their astonishing mobility. Guided everywhere they went by locals, the main-force battalions could move twenty-five miles in five hours, attacking a government post at night and vanishing without a trace before daylight. "The ARVN has more troops and better equipment than the VC," a senior communist defector told his captors. "But ARVN intelligence is very poor. The ARVN would be more effective if it had intelligence like the VC's. The Viet Cong have agents everywhere, from peasants in hamlets to high-ranking army officers in Saigon. I've never seen evidence that the ARVN has infiltrated the VC."[31]

For now, Westmoreland avoided that granular work in the hamlets, designating battles against large communist main forces as "the gold standard." He assumed that American tactics, speed, and technology would inflict catastrophic losses on the communist battalions in Phase II, severing them from their critical tunnel complexes and base areas inside South Vietnam near the population centers. Local guerrillas could then be picked off at will by more "clearing" operations, better police work, and the insufficiently exploited incentives of Chieu Hoi (Open Arms), an amnesty program that paid VC guerrillas to come in from the cold. As local security improved, free elections would be held and a civilian government seated in Saigon and the provinces by the end of 1967.

In Phase III of Westmoreland's "strategy," beginning in 1968, the American military would push the enemy regular forces out of South Vietnam, uproot the local VC and their infrastructure, accelerate the expansion and modernization of the ARVN and its territorial forces, and begin the "Vietnamization" of the war by handing over responsibility to Saigon and starting the drawdown of US forces.[32]

It was a lot to manage, and from the standpoint of Phase I, Phase III must have seemed a long way off, but Westmoreland embraced the war eagerly. It fit with what he knew from his education and career—offensive operations with overwhelming force to defeat the enemy—and also promised a tide of appropriations, battle, promotions, glory, and victory. But only if Westmoreland's assumptions were met: that the enemy would not react effectively to the American moves, and that the continuing failure of rural pacification by the ARVN would not sink Westmoreland's big-unit war on the periphery. What was the point of fighting the NVA in their remote sanctuaries if the populated and most vital parts of South Vietnam were steadily falling under VC control? Why erect a "shield" of American combat power for a nation-building effort that was rotting from within? Why send American troops to defend the South Vietnamese when, if properly motivated, they could defend themselves?

Westmoreland did ponder these questions. The war, he later said, seemed to have been fashioned by Lewis Carroll's Red Queen: "It took all the running you could do just to stay in the same place." Troops sent in

major operations to destroy enemy main-force units exposed villages and militias that had been protected by those same troops in pacification roles. Troops scattered in pacification roles—a squad here, a platoon there—could be destroyed or merely evaded by enemy main-force units. Because the enemy did not have to occupy a village to control it—nocturnal visits, terror, threats, and indoctrination did the trick—their forces could be spread far more thinly than the ARVN. They could do more with less. The only way to break out of this stagnation was to motivate the South Vietnamese to fight in the field and defend the villages. Search and destroy by Americans could never be more than a partial solution, and one sure to fail if the South Vietnamese did not themselves rise to the occasion. For a moment in 1965, Westmoreland had the opportunity to do what MacArthur had done in Korea: pull the ARVN under his own unified command and *make* them fight under American direction. But Westy was no MacArthur. Diffident, punctilious, and bureaucratic, Westmoreland looked at the ARVN and its quarreling personalities and recoiled in fright. They were too much to handle. And so Westy did what he did best: he emitted high-sounding explanations about "respecting" South Vietnamese pride and sovereignty, and then, like Sisyphus, he began pushing his boulder up one side of the hill, while the South Vietnamese began pushing theirs up the other.[33]

Chapter 5

IA DRANG

President Johnson's Rolling Thunder air campaign and ground buildup achieved exactly what the Pentagon war-gamers had predicted: it increased the flow of North Vietnamese regulars into South Vietnam, effectively raising the "threshold of pain" and matching Westmoreland's troop increases. If the US military was coming to save the ARVN, the NVA would fight to save the VC and cement Hanoi's influence in the contested South. The air strikes that Johnson had assumed would deter Hanoi and increase his leverage had instead enraged the communist leadership and made them more determined than before to conquer South Vietnam.[1]

Between July and November 1965, the number of North Vietnamese soldiers in South Vietnam quadrupled as Hanoi brought South Vietnam's Central Highlands and the adjacent strips of Laos and Cambodia under the control of the NVA high command. Seven new NVA regiments hiked into South Vietnam, raising communist strength in South Vietnam to an estimated 200,000 trained main-force troops.[2]

Even as Westmoreland moved to implement search and destroy in 1965, the MACV commander complained that whatever advantage he had enjoyed in June, when Johnson had authorized a surge in forces to 200,000 men, was fast withering away. His combat units were swallowed up by a vast wilderness, described this way by a newly arrived Marine: "triple-canopied jungle, mountains unfolding into higher mountains, ravines and gorges and fast-moving rivers and waterfalls and steep cliffs

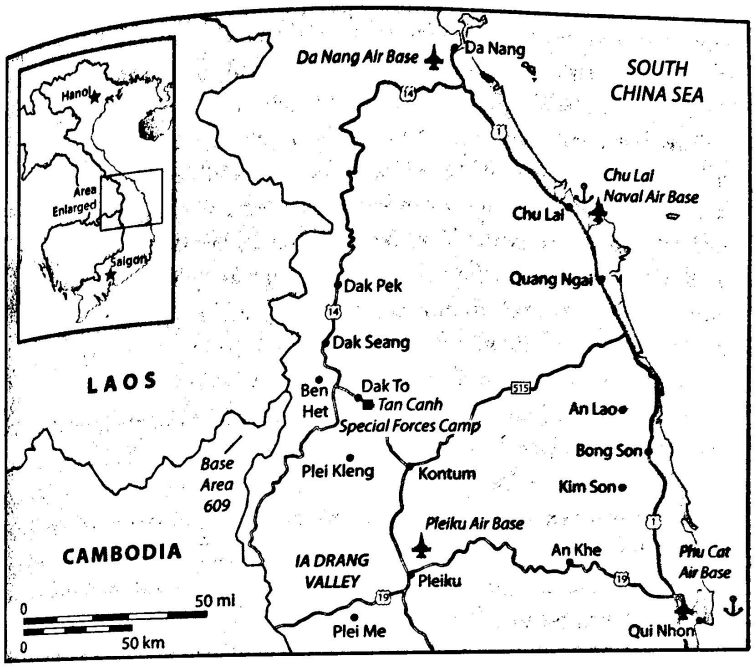
and smoky little hamlets and great valleys of bamboo and elephant grass." Worse, the VC/NVA buildup rate was double that of US forces. Every ninety days the enemy would add fifteen maneuver battalions, the United States just seven.[3]

Westmoreland looked for a place on the map where he could physically block NVA infiltration and impose a teachable moment on the communist enemy, who would be hit with the concentrated fury of American mobility and firepower. He found that place in the Ia Drang Valley in South Vietnam's Central Highlands in November 1965. NVA units moved up the valley and into South Vietnam in regular echelons. Westy planned to find them and hit them hard to accent MACV's shift from defensive enclaves to offensive search and destroy.

The tactic had been tried out against concentrations of Viet Cong in August and September with good results. Accustomed to the casual tempo of the ARVN, the VC had been surprised by the vigor of the Americans. They had been raked by air strikes and artillery, set upon by American rapid-reaction forces, and then hit with B-52s, which could be dispatched on "quick runs" from Guam to crush even the sturdiest bunker and tunnel complexes. A kill ratio that had hovered around 2:1 for the ARVN soared to 6:1 under the more effective Americans. Hopes for the operation in the Ia Drang Valley were so high that it became the centerpiece of a battle that Westmoreland grandly named "the Pleiku Campaign."[4]

Ia Drang lay at the heart of the Central Highlands region, which Hanoi was using as a route to infiltrate troops and supplies into South Vietnam from the Ho Chi Minh Trail's Cambodian outlets. For Westmoreland, this Pleiku Campaign was a key to the war. If he could defeat the North Vietnamese in the field and then turn the Central Highlands over to Saigon for territorial defense and development, he would have sealed the leaky Cambodian border and would be able to turn to other problems, like the equally leaky Laotian border, the DMZ, and the Mekong Delta, gradually reducing or eliminating the problems until Hanoi saw the writing on the wall and quit.[5]

This theory of victory was as improbable as had been the French theory at Dien Bien Phu, which had sought to "seal" North Vietnam's border with Laos. The Pleiku Campaign originated in the same delusions that had beset the French. There would be no "sealing" the Cambodian border, by



The Central Highlands Region

Westmoreland or anyone else. The French had lost control of Cambodia in the 1950s when anti-French guerrillas had taken over the colony's eastern provinces and moved into alliance with the Viet Minh. The Cambodian people, bludgeoned then by French reprisals, were in no mood to engage in this latest round of fighting. Even if the Cambodian sanctuary problem could be solved, Westmoreland in South Vietnam would struggle just to *find* the enemy infiltrators or supplies, and would have to go searching for them.

If he found them, after days or weeks of "saturation patrolling," the NVA would either fight if the odds were in their favor or melt away to fight another day if the odds were against them, as the VC units pulverized in August and September had done. Even if they fought and were chewed up by US firepower, the NVA infiltrators could retreat into Cambodia or Laos, technically neutral nations where American troops would not pursue. There they would replace their casualties with new recruits coming down the

trails from North Vietnam, and lie low until the Americans tired of looking for them and flew away to other areas. Then they would reemerge in South Vietnam to take back all of the ground they had briefly lost.[6]

This inevitable denouement could be prevented only by a strong, respected, and determined Saigon government, willing to push into the secured area, rebuild or improve it, and then defend it against future incursions with troops and police. And yet this is precisely what the American-South Vietnamese war effort lacked from beginning to end—respected government troops and administrators who would doggedly "hold" districts that had been "cleared" of Viet Cong.

Doubts also arose as to the value of the terrain that Westmoreland was contesting. Ia Drang lay in II Corps, a vast but unpopulated area of operations (AO). It contained half of South Vietnam's territory but less than a fifth of its population. Winning there would do nothing to check the rise of the VC insurgency in South Vietnam's populated areas. In short, the Pleiku Campaign, even if successful, would fail because it would not deter VC activity elsewhere and would leave no formidable stay-behind force to close the door to the *next* North Vietnamese infiltration. As an American platoon leader in the Central Highlands put it: "We would fight and bleed to take ground that the [NVA] would pull away from after they had exacted their toll. We always left afterward so they could always come back if they liked that particular place."[7]

But Westmoreland had a conventional mind that preferred to isolate the military elements of the equation and pursue them alone. If the "op" succeeded but the AO later fell back under communist control, well, that could not be blamed on Westy, who would have already declared victory and moved on to other areas of operation—citing a high kill ratio and tons of enemy supplies destroyed as proof of his prowess.

He would blame subsequent defeats in the briefly conquered AO on the South Vietnamese government, or on US civilians charged with advising provincial reconstruction and defense. In the worst case, where shaming the ARVN or US civilians was not sufficient, Westy promised a "clean-up phase" after the major battles were fought, where all communist remnants would be located and destroyed by American troops fresh from battle.

How they would be "located," let alone "destroyed," was never explained. Thus, even at the outset, the American war effort was fatally flawed, self-deluding, and without an effective strategy. The Army, in effect, was waging a war it could not win, but pushed ahead to uphold its own service interests, placate the president, and send political messages about American "toughness."[8]

In October 1965, Westmoreland received intelligence that three NVA regiments had concentrated in Pleiku province around the Ia Drang Valley, with plans to clean out the American-run Special Forces camps in the region and then drive eastward to the coast, splitting South Vietnam in two. This would be the heaviest blow of what appeared to be a looming NVA general offensive. Hanoi's strategy, as understood by MACV, was to recruit more "organic" VC units in the heavily populated coastal plains of South Vietnam and reinforce them with infiltrating NVA units to rip away South Vietnam's northern provinces and convert Saigon into a beleaguered rump state. Having just taken delivery of the three brigades of the US 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), Westmoreland planned to use the Cav's power and mobility to nip the threat in the bud.[9]

There would be nothing subtle about it. The Cav built its base camp at An Khe, halfway between Qui Nhon and Pleiku. It sat in a valley among the Central Highlands along two important arteries—Route 19 and the Song Ba River. An Khe was broad and flat enough to accommodate 20,000 troops and a 300-acre heliport dubbed "the Golf Course." "The Cav," an officer boasted, "will be the first unit to locate right in the middle of VC-land and the idea is to be right there in the middle of 'em, to clean 'em out of here, pronto." Westy's persistent fear was that the NVA would hew to the old Vietnamese proverb "He who controls the Central Highlands controls South Vietnam" and strike from the hills along Route 19 to the coast, scissoring the country in two. This came to be called Westy's "scissors theory."[10]

Westmoreland ordered up two operations to find and destroy the NVA infiltrators and their local VC infrastructure in October 1965. In Operation Happy Valley, two brigades would fly into the Vinh Thanh Valley near Pleiku to "search and clear," a search and destroy variant applied in populated areas to destroy or remove the VC and "restore government control." In Operation Silver Bayonet, the third Cav brigade would fly into the largely uninhabited Ia Drang Valley, find those elusive NVA battalions, and bring them to battle, where they could be hemmed in by the airmobile American infantry and killed by artillery and air strikes. Both air assault operations

would be textbook examples of search and destroy. Westmoreland believed that they would demonstrate how to shatter Hanoi's insurgency and general offensive. A Cav helicopter pilot flying into An Khe for the first time was not so sure: "Vietnam looked very big and very green, it looked like the perfect place to have a guerrilla war, if you were going to be the guerrilla."[11]

Operation Happy Valley took aim at a river valley used by the NVA to infiltrate South Vietnam. It was in the middle of nowhere on the western edge of the least populated region of South Vietnam. Steep foothills wreathed in clouds rose from high wooded ridges. Amid the chaos of Diem's downfall, its village and hamlet leadership had been chased away by the Viet Cong, who now ran the valley as a VC territory. All of that brutally changed when two brigades of the Cav arrived at the populated southern end of the valley on October 13 for seven days of what the division called "domination." The week of "domination" would be followed by a week of "resettlement and construction" and crowned by a week of "consolidation." In other words, the Cav assumed that in just three weeks they would not only defeat the enemy but permanently remove him.

The Army's own reporting on Happy Valley signaled a determination to ignore facts. The VC had taken over the valley and burned every public building to illustrate the destruction of government authority and slow any attempt by the ARVN to retake the area. They had begun planting and harvesting food for communist units. The American attack, preceded by air strikes and artillery "prep fires," certainly stunned the enemy, but by no means drove them out or restored government authority. In fact, reading the Cav and MACV reports on the operation, it appeared that the Army was not so much fighting to win as to create the *appearance* of winning.

MACV flourished Operation Happy Valley as an example of how to do search and clear right. The enemy was surprised by the artillery fire and air strikes, and then set upon by company-sized air assaults that were not particularly well coordinated because there was no friendly intelligence issuing from the VC-held valley. The Cav carved the valley into thousand-acre "boxes" and cleared each one as they moved south to north. They lifted troops onto the high ground overlooking the valley and swept downward to a blocking force on the valley floor. The "grunts," so named for the grunt they emitted when heaving their backpacks over their shoulders in tropical heat, spent a week advancing two miles a day up the valley.

They discovered caches of rice but few VC, most of whom withdrew or hid in tunnels. The enemy, a Cav pilot observed, were not losing at all. They "controlled the situation" and were "bending with the force to learn more about how the Cav operated." They knew every LZ in every thousand-acre box and attacked them with .50-caliber machine guns during every insertion and extraction. To at least one pilot those .50-caliber rounds, an inch long and a half inch wide, moving at 3,000 feet per second, looked "big as baseballs."

That was enough punishment for MACV. At this point, Westy's staff concluded that "a peaceful and stable environment" had been created. They were clearly just checking every box except the most important one: effectiveness. "With all our mobility, the VC still called the shots," a veteran of the operation confided. "We fought on *their* terms." No matter: MACV now spent a week checking the next box: "resettlement and reconstruction." Army helicopters circled the heights with loudspeakers urging the peasants, who had taken to the hills to escape the fighting, to return to their hamlets on the valley floor. Few did. Some descended in the mornings to poke through the abandoned huts and take whatever belongings and food they could find, but then returned to the hills in the afternoon.[12]

National Police were bused in to take over security of the still empty valley, and construction of a CIDG (civilian irregular defense group) camp was begun. None of this was reassuring. The police did not linger long, and the civilian irregulars were local Jarai tribesmen, an ethnic minority most famous for their ritual drunkenness. Whenever the Army loudspeakers started up, the VC, hidden on the ridges, banged pots and pans loudly to drown out the broadcasts. They also fired on the helicopters, forcing them to higher altitudes where the loudspeakers warbled inaudibly. Army engineers appeared to smooth and repair the valley road that had been cratered by the VC, and this, MACV disingenuously declared, made clear to the locals "that a permanent, stabilizing force would remain in the valley and that security would not vanish as soon as the American troops left and the VC returned."[13]

The "resettlement and construction" of the still deserted valley was judged complete after a week, when a Cav battalion lingered long enough to check the third box: "consolidation." A burnt school and church were repaired, vaccinations were administered to those who came down from

the hills, and pro-government leaflets were handed out—all of the loudspeakers having failed or proven useless. The leaflets would fail too, for, as a counterinsurgency adviser scoffed, "peasants don't follow leaflets; they follow people," just exactly what was missing here where there were no government officials to protect and organize the frightened country folk. At night, batteries of the US 77th Artillery raked the surrounding hills with 105 mm "harassment and interdiction fire" (H&I) to discourage "curfew violators," which was what the VC were called after the "domination" phase had worked its magic.

After a few days of this, the Cav threw a party—Operation Friendship—in which the district and hamlet chiefs, shamed into returning to their dangerous valley by the exploits of the Cav, joined with the American battalion commander to make speeches and hear a concert by the Cav band. The Cav then departed, after distributing 550 pounds of used clothing as well as pallets of milk, orange juice, and C-rations. It was, MACV declared, a great victory that "showed the essential elements of a successful pacification program." As naive as that sounded, the underlying analysis was even more guileless. Happy Valley had succeeded because ground was taken and held, and because the operation had persisted "for sufficient duration to insure lasting effect." Even the military authors could not have believed what they were writing. When the last Cav slick departed the valley, the hamlet chiefs ran for their lives and the Viet Cong moved back in. Ops like this, the Cav's counterinsurgency expert scoffed, were "gimmicks—a bunch of activity reports but no real results."[14]

In Operation Silver Bayonet, which would flare into the Battle of Ia Drang, the Americans searched for two weeks, taking light fire from the occasional sniper, and pausing in every highland village to offer vaccinations and medical care and distribute food aid, which the troops called "civic action." The Cav used Caribou two-engine aircraft, each able to carry thirty-two troops and take off and land on dirt runways, to move quickly into areas thought to contain enemy troops. From there, the men fanned out in "saturation patrols" to locate the enemy. If they found him, firebases would grab the coordinates, strike fighters would load the correct ordnance, and helicopters would rush reinforcements to the scene.

After searching for two weeks, the Cav finally bumped into some NVA stragglers, and Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore's battalion of the division's 3rd Brigade was dispatched in Hueys to the Ia Drang Valley to engage the main enemy force, whose exact size remained unknown. Moore's grunts, men of Colonel George Armstrong Custer's old unit, the 1st Battalion of the 7th Cavalry Regiment, were ordered to pin down the NVA infiltrators long enough for them to be destroyed by Cav reinforcements, two batteries of 105 mm howitzers, and air strikes.

Moore touched down in the midst of three NVA battalions and triggered a three-day battle in which two entire NVA regiments attempted to surround and destroy a single American battalion, an operation that must have reminded Moore and his staff of the US 7th Cavalry's most notorious action—the Battle of Little Bighorn.

The Battle of Ia Drang showcased the technologies that Westmoreland counted on to bring victory. Every search and destroy operation in South Vietnam would follow the pattern of Ia Drang. Military intelligence would piece together information on enemy routes, hideouts, and strength, and then the operation would be drawn up. The infantry would never be alone. B-52s would bomb suspected enemy base camps and tunnel complexes. Ground operations would be conducted under the long shadow of tactical air support and artillery firebases. The helicopter-rich Cav even had an airborne artillery battalion—a dedicated force of three firing batteries that could be lifted in quickly by Chinooks to support the infantry operations.

As Moore's battalion flew from Plei Mei into the Ia Drang Valley on November 14, 1965, to commence its search and destroy operation, it felt the protective embrace of two batteries of 105 mm artillery. The guns, thudding away from a nearby firebase—LZ Falcon—plowed up the ground around Moore's landing zone, blowing away trees, high grass, and anything else that might conceal enemy infantry. As the first assault company prepared to descend to LZ X-Ray, the howitzers ceased fire, so as not to hit the helicopters in the air or on the ground. The battalion's escorting gunships swarmed over the LZ firing rockets and machine guns to hit anything the artillery might have missed, and then ascended to orbit the landing zones with "on-call fire." With door gunners in the slicks blazing away at the trees and the high grass, Moore's command group and half of his Bravo Company then descended in steep turns to the ground in sixteen Hueys.

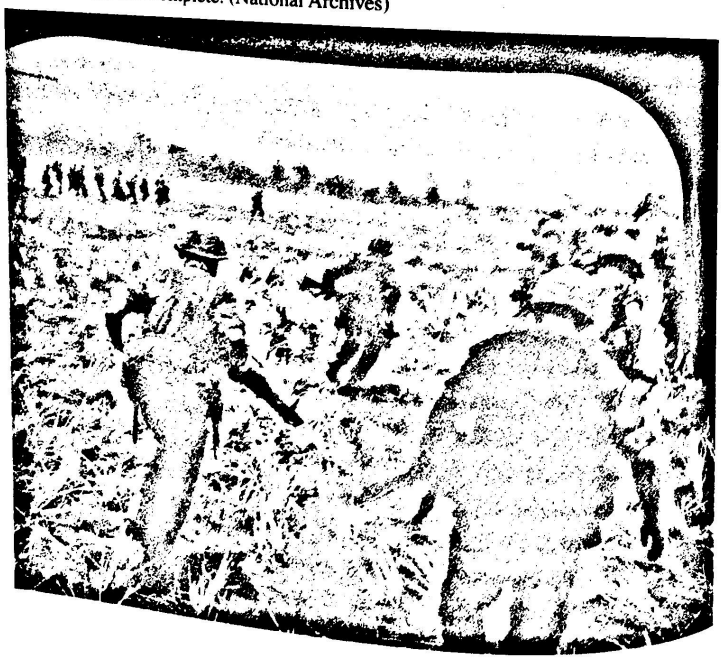
Moore's infantry slid off the birds and ran toward the surrounding trees, firing their M-16 rifles. The job of the first lift was always the same—secure

a perimeter and hold it until the combat assault was complete. While squads of one platoon staked out a perimeter around LZ X-Ray, Moore was joined by his command group and a Montagnard translator, who spoke English, Vietnamese, and Hmong—the last the language of the mountain people in this wedge of the Central Highlands.

Moore's command and control helicopter orbited overhead. In it were Moore's operations chief and a trio of liaison officers—one to communicate with the supporting artillery, another to arrange efficient lifts of helicopter transport to and from the LZ, and the third (the FAC) to de-conflict all of the flights and artillery and summon fixed-wing air strikes as needed.

With Moore's sixteen Hueys returning to Plei Mei to pick up the rest of Company B and the vanguard of Company A, Moore massed the few men he had in the center of LZ X-Ray as an "offensive striking force." While he worked, one of his squads on the perimeter brought in a prisoner. He

The job of the first lift was always the same—secure a perimeter and hold it until the combat assault was complete. (National Archives)



was NVA, and he gave every evidence of the misery that North Vietnamese infiltrators suffered on their long march from North to South Vietnam. He was unarmed, and dressed in a ragged khaki shirt and pants. His canteen was empty, and he said that he had eaten nothing but green bananas for five days. He had a shocking bit of intelligence. There were three NVA battalions on the mountain above them, he said, adding, "We want to kill Americans, but have been unable to find any."

They had found them now. Two hours after landing in the LZ, with Bravo Company on the ground and lead elements of Alpha and Charlie Companies flying in, the NVA began to strike at the root of the operation. They began to hit LZ X-Ray with 60 mm and 81 mm mortar fire. Moore finished the lift with difficulty and reported that he was already caught in a blistering firefight, one of his Bravo Company platoons on the right flank nearly cut off and surrounded. Moore deployed his three companies in a rough circle, to support each other and prevent the loss of the LZ. He radioed his command helicopter and directed the liaison officers aboard to place heavy fire by air strikes, gunships, and artillery on the mountain slopes around the LZ and every approach to it.

The difficulty of search and destroy, even when the enemy was found, immediately emerged. With the troops battling under trees, scrub, and clouds of dust and smoke, Moore's FAC and his artillery liaison officer—searching in vain for well-defined terrain features in a uniform and featureless landscape—could not tell where the forward elements of their own infantry were. The bushes and the trees all looked alike from the air and the ground, and the isolated Bravo Company platoon on the right flank could not be rescued with air strikes or artillery because it could not say with any certainty exactly where it was. The problem became insuperable when 100 enemy troops crabbed forward to the edge of the lost platoon's position, making "close fire support" too risky to be attempted.

Moore then tried to bring in his D Company, but as its lead units landed they were mangled by well-aimed enemy fire—the commander's radio operator killed the instant he stepped off the bird, both his door gunner and pilot wounded. Moore, who estimated that he was fighting at least 500 enemy troops, with more on the way, now requested another rifle company, and was told that B Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry, was assembling at its pickup zones.